

**“NOW IS THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MOMENT”  
– EARLE PAGE AND THE IMAGINING OF  
AUSTRALIA**

**Stephen Leslie Wilks, September 2017**

**A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy of The Australian National University**

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**DECLARATION**

This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any tertiary institution, and, to the best of my knowledge, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

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Stephen Wilks  
September 2017

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This is a study of the ideas held by an intelligent, dedicated, somewhat eccentric visionary, and of his attempts to shape the young Australian nation.

It challenges, I hope convincingly, misconceptions about Earle Page. It sets him in wider context, both in terms of what was happening around him and of trying to interpret the implications his career has for Australia's history. It contributes to filling a gap in perceptions of the Australian past and may also have relevance for to-day's political environment surrounding national development policy.

Thanks foremostly and immensely to Professor Nicholas Brown of the Australian National University School of History, my thesis supervisor and main guide who patiently read and re-read drafts in order to help make this a far better thesis than it could ever have been otherwise. Thanks also to supervisory panel members Frank Bongiorno, Peter Stanley and Linda Botterill; staff and students of the ANU School of History including those in the National Centre of Biography; and Kent Fedorowich of the University of the West of England.

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I met several people who encountered Page in person, including Ann Moyal who undertook the formidable task of editing the draft of his *Truant Surgeon*. In doing so, she turned this memoir into Australia's foremost prime ministerial autobiography. Helen Snyders and Geoff Page, members of the inestimable Page clan, were both immensely helpful with documents and personal recollections. I alone am responsible for opinions and errors.

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**NOTES ON PRESENTATION OF THE TEXT**

Some of the capitalisation and spelling of common terms appearing in quotes has been made consistent with usage in the rest of this thesis.

Units of electricity replicate the original usage employed in each quote and source.

Page references to *Truant Surgeon* are for the widely available paperback reprint by Black Inc., retitled simply *Earle Page*.

## **ABSTRACT**

Earle Christmas Grafton Page (1880-1961) – Country Party leader, Treasurer and Prime Minister – was the most extraordinary visionary to hold high public office in the Australian Parliament during the first several decades of the twentieth century. His incessant activism in regionalism, new states, hydroelectricity, economic planning, co-operative federalism and rural universities had a distinctively personal dimension. But he also contributed to and led several larger, and in some respects, perennial themes in Australian history related to issues summarised in this thesis as developmentalism. This study assesses the relationship between Page and this wider current of debate.

Page's career as one of Australia's longest serving senior politicians is characterised by his remarkably consistent but pragmatically opportunistic efforts to shape the still formative government and society of the Australian nation according to his personal vision of its economic and social future. His efforts influenced more conventional government policy, both directly through his membership of governments and indirectly through his long-term impact on what policy ideas were prominent in public debate. Page's successes and also his failures elucidate the wider issue of the place of concepts of national development in modern Australian history.

This thesis is a biographically-based study of the significance of applied policy ideas. The emphasis is on describing and analysing the most distinctive of Page's policy initiatives, seeking to illuminate his significance in the wider world of ideas and politics. Page has been cast by some historians as merely reflective of a Country Party intent on securing resources for rural interests: this is greatly to underestimate his originality and significance. Although he drew on specific ideas held by other public figures and civic movements, Page uniquely moulded these into a coherent national vision that drew heavily on concepts of the desirable spatial disposition of population and the appropriate scale of public institutions.

Over decades, Page made telling references to what he called the psychological moment. This marked whenever he judged that he at last had the public and political support needed to achieve one of his treasured policy goals. It encapsulates his awareness that his vision of the nation normally sat far outside the political mainstream and of the consequent difficulties he faced in trying to implement it. It also suggested, however, a sense that his ideas had potential to appeal to an Australian public who were open to fresh ways of viewing the national project.

Page broadened existing developmentalist thought through his rare synthesis of ideas that both delineated and stretched the Australian political imagination. His rich career confirms that Australia has long inspired popular ideals of national development, but also that their practical implementation was increasingly challenged during the twentieth-century. Page's influence and experience supports arguments that Australian public life has been rich in applied thinkers. His work shows how assessment of the contribution of an engaged individual, their ideas and advocacy, can illuminate a past that is both relevant to still unresolved issues in Australian politics and which is also suggestive of alternative paths.

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**ABBREVIATIONS**

AAC – Australian Agricultural Council

AIF – Australian Imperial Force

AIPS – Australian Institute of Political Science

ACPA – Australian Country Party Association

AFFO – Australian Farmers' Federal Organisation

ALP – Australian Labor Party

ANU – Australian National University

BMA – British Medical Association (Australia)

CRCC – Clarence River County Council

CSIR – Council for Scientific and Industrial Research

CSIRO – Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation

DMC – Development and Migration Commission

EPP – Earle Page Papers, National Library of Australia

FRM – Federal Reconstruction Movement

FSA – Farmers and Settlers' Association

NAA – National Archives of Australia

NHMRC – National Health and Medical Research Council

NLA – National Library of Australia

SEC – State Electricity Commission of Victoria

TVA – Tennessee Valley Authority

UAP – United Australia Party

UCM – United Country Movement

UCP – United Country Party of New South Wales

UNE – University of New England

VFU – Victorian Farmers' Union

WEA – Workers' Educational Association

## **INTRODUCTION**

The idealism and tireless activism of Earle Page sparked radically differing reactions. H.P. Moss, Commonwealth Electricity Supply Controller, saw him as “a dreamer of dreams with a firm hold on mother earth.”<sup>1</sup> Former Prime Minister Stanley Melbourne Bruce recalled that Page as his Treasurer was so “bursting with energy” that he routinely had to be advised “my dear Page, for God’s sake go away and have your head read.” But Bruce added that “if you had the patience to listen to Page, he’d come up with a helluva good idea now and then.”<sup>2</sup> Page’s Country Party colleague Arthur Fadden was once heard to shout “he’s a dribbling, doddering old halfwit!”<sup>3</sup> Much later, political scientist Don Aitkin judged Page to be “almost without question the most inventive federal politician of the twentieth century”, yet also “the most under-regarded politician of the federal arena.”<sup>4</sup>

My thesis is that the career of Earle Page as one of Australia’s longest serving senior politicians is characterised by his remarkably consistent but pragmatically opportunistic efforts to shape the still formative government and society of the Australian nation according to his personal vision of its economic and social future. These efforts influenced more conventional policy, both directly through his membership of governments and indirectly through his long-term impact on what ideas were prominent in public debate. His successes and also his failures elucidate the wider issue of the place of concepts of national development in modern Australian history.

This study is therefore a biographically-based examination of how applied ideas about national development interacted with Australian politics during the twentieth century. It is focussed on efforts to shape the entire nation, from the

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in foreword to Earle Page, *Clarence River Hydro-Electric Gorge Scheme*, Sydney, August 1944, no pagination.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Cecil Edwards, *Bruce of Melbourne: Man of Two Worlds*, William Heinemann, London, 1965, p. 82.

<sup>3</sup> Recalled by publisher Peter Ryan in *It Strikes Me: Collected Essays 1994-2010*, Quadrant Books, Sydney, 2011, p. 266. The comment was made amidst an evening group drinking session when Page briefly absented himself.

<sup>4</sup> Don Aitkin, ‘Page, Earle Christmas Grafton’, in Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, pp. 488-9.

early post-Federation years when the role of the newly-created Commonwealth government was still an open issue, up to mid-century when Australian politics and public policy had assumed a more settled form. It uses an assessment of Page's place in history as a basis for considering the conduct of a wide range of important policy issues in Australia's past. His long and varied career revolved around leadership of a series of political campaigns to shape the nation's economy, society and polity. These campaigns tapped broader Australian modes of thought concerning the disposition of population and industry, the fostering of economic development and structures of government, but were enlivened by Page's clearly defined ideas, particularly about the spatial distribution of these elements and the appropriate role and scale of public institutions.

My emphasis is on Page's most distinctive ideas and initiatives concerning national development. Page was one of many important Australian leaders – figures as diverse as Ben Chifley, Thomas Playford and John McEwen – who assumed that such a vast and formative nation was surely open to the aggressive exploitation of natural resources and the fostering of new industries. Although Page drew on ideas promoted by other such public figures and by civic movements, he uniquely moulded them into his own coherent vision. This synthesis has received little attention from historians, the result of Page often being cast as merely reflective of the mainstream of the Country Party and hence intent primarily on securing resources for rural interests. Such a view greatly underestimates the originality and significance of his imagining of the Australian nation.

Over decades, Page used the telling phrase “now is the psychological moment”. These words (or slight variations) appeared in public statements, private correspondence, official documents and his memoirs to mark whenever he thought that the stars had at last aligned to provide the public and political support needed to achieve one of his treasured policy goals.<sup>5</sup> He used this

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<sup>5</sup> The phrase “the psychological moment” had fairly wide currency before Page: prominent early users include Joseph Conrad, Mark Twain and Alexander Wheelock Thayer in his biography of

favoured phrase in connection with many different issues, including new states, hydroelectricity, economic planning and national insurance. This phrase was much more than just a rhetorical device. It encapsulated how Page saw his vision of the nation as being far ahead of the views held by most of his political peers and the wider public. It also suggested, however, a sense that his ideas had potential to appeal to an Australian public who at this early juncture in their nation's history were open to fresh ways of viewing the national project. It simultaneously signalled the power of his vision to capture the inchoate interests of others. It further indicates an awareness of the difficulties he faced in trying to implement ideas that sat far outside the political mainstream.

While Page's policy campaigns used conventional party and parliamentary politics as their main base, he also drew on the public campaigns and associations, the rural press and business leaders to promote his ideals. His consistency lay in his decades-long pursuit of his vision of a transformed Australia. His pragmatic opportunism emerges from his preparedness to wait for years for political circumstances that presented a chance of implementing a particular policy passion. Analysis of these ideas and campaigns ultimately leads to broader conclusions on the place in Australian history of proposals to shape and invigorate the nation's economy and society – often described as nation-building, but to which I apply the term *developmentalism*. For all his idiosyncrasies, Page helps us assess what specific issues were current and gauge the depth of their support during his years in politics. Charting Page's growing difficulties in that political career also delineates how wider policy-making environments changed through the middle decades of the twentieth century.

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Beethoven. Page's apparent first reference to the psychological moment was in a 1915 public document proposing a new state of northern New South Wales; see chapter 1, p. 61.



Figure 1: Earle Page in early Canberra. (Mildenhall Collection, NAA, A3560, 6053, undated).

### Who was Earle Page?

Earle Christmas Grafton Page was born on 8 August 1880 in Grafton in north-eastern New South Wales, 630 kilometres north of Sydney. He was a rural surgeon who helped found the federal Country Party and was its leader from 1921 until 1939. His membership of the House of Representatives from 1919 until his death in 1961 makes Page Australia's third longest serving federal parliamentarian, after William Morris ('Billy') Hughes and Philip Ruddock. He was a Cabinet minister for a total of twenty years, and *de facto* Deputy Prime Minister under Stanley Bruce (1923-29) and Joseph Lyons (1934-39).<sup>6</sup> He held the portfolios of Treasury (1923-29), Commerce (1934-39, 1940-41) and Health (1937-38), but spent most of the 1940s on the political outer before resuming the Health portfolio (1949-56). In 1941-42 he was Australian Minister resident in London.

Page was even briefly Prime Minister. This was on a caretaker basis for just nineteen days in April 1939 following the death of Lyons, but it still accords him recognition he would not otherwise have. Page is well known for his roles in creating the urban-rural conservative coalition that has been a feature of Australian national politics since 1923, in resetting the financial relationship

<sup>6</sup> The title of Deputy Prime Minister had no formal status at the time.

between the Commonwealth and states via the 1927 Financial Agreement, and in pioneering a program of publicly subsidised health insurance in the 1950s. Accounts of Page often also raise his less successful efforts to create a new state in northern New South Wales. He is also known – too well known, for it is but one feature of a long and rich career – for his 1939 attack on the personal fitness of Robert Menzies to serve as Prime Minister.

Page died on 20 December 1961. In five decades of public life he remained resolutely faithful to his core strategies for transforming Australia. These were, in summary, the decentralisation of population and industry to the countryside; regional governance that encouraged local engagement with social and economic development but in accordance with policies set by a strong central government; national economic planning of infrastructure and industries; electrification of the countryside, especially via hydroelectricity; rural education to encourage decentralisation and civic awareness; and a reformed constitution to institutionalise Commonwealth-state co-operation.<sup>7</sup> While some of these causes were very much of Page's time, others – notably federalism and regionalism – have been in a near constant state of flux in Australian political debate.<sup>8</sup> From both perspectives, Page can serve to illuminate the chronic lack of resolution of many important aspects of Australian national development, still apparent to-day. These include the state-Commonwealth power balance, tensions between countryside and city over the allocation of public resources, and the difficulty of implementing a coherent national economic policy.

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<sup>7</sup> Although Page's listings of his favoured policy causes varied from time to time, these were the most consistently mentioned. Sometimes he added a secure banking system; see for example 'Australian Country Party Complimentary Dinner to Sir Earle Page, Sydney 22nd June 1956, Address by Sir Earle Page' and 'Notes for Country Party Complimentary Dinner 22/6/56', EPP, folder 2358. Others that he mentioned at times included tariff reform and Imperial free trade; see Earle Page, *Earle Page*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2001, p. 438. This is a reprint of Page's *Truant Surgeon: The Inside Story of Forty Years of Australian Political Life*, edited by Ann Moyal (Mozley), Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1963. All page references in this thesis are to this widely available Black Inc. reprint, but which is henceforth referred to under the original title.

<sup>8</sup> See A.J. Brown and J.A. Bellamy (eds.), *Federalism and Regionalism in Australia: New Approaches, New Institutions?*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 2007.

### **Why Page?: a biographical approach to the study of ideas**

The Country Party is said to be hard to classify using the conventional left-right political spectrum: even for a regionally-based party, it is *sui generis*.<sup>9</sup> Page himself is at least as problematical. A cursory survey of his career could lead to political biographer David Marr's comments about "knights on horseback" – "attractive bit players" in politics who see the everyday world "not quite as the rest of us do", while "what drives them is always a little opaque."<sup>10</sup> Marr wrote with Tony Abbott foremost in mind, but his comments could also be directed at more marginal figures such as Frederic Eggleston, Bert Kelly, Barry Jones and many others. Such figures were often thoughtful individuals who challenged fundamentals and occasionally nurtured ideas that grew into mainstream policy, including Eggleston on private investment in infrastructure, Kelly on free trade and Jones on innovation.<sup>11</sup> Their mixed fortunes helps define what was and was not politically possible at various times in Australia's past, and highlights the creativity that politics could occasionally encompass. It does not decisively matter if, like Page, they did not achieve as much as they wanted – they can still be a valuable focus for what they and their policy campaigning suggest about Australian history and the historical basis of current conditions and debates.

Applying Marr's very generic label to Page only partially conveys his significance. Far from being opaque, he made very clear what he wanted and why. As a career politician he certainly had a grasp of reality, strained as this was at times. Above all, he was not a bit player. Self-perceived visionaries are hardly rare but Page was different – a long term holder of high office who was

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<sup>9</sup> See for example comments by John Paul, 'Albert Dunstan and Victorian Government', in Cameron Hazlehurst (ed.), *Australian Conservatism: Essays in Twentieth Century Political History*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1979, p. 169; and by Geoff Cockfield and Linda Courtenay Botterill, 'From Country to National to Regional?', in Botterill and Cockfield (eds.), *The National Party: Prospects for the Great Survivors*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2009, p. 199.

<sup>10</sup> David Marr, *The Best Australian Essays 2012: Political Animal: The Making of Tony Abbott*, Black Inc., Collingwood, 2012, p. 110.

<sup>11</sup> Eggleston is particularly well documented in Warren G. Osmond's *Frederick Eggleston: An Intellectual in Australian Politics*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985. Eggleston was a more conventional thinker than Page, committed to Deakinite progressivism and cultural conservatism. Unlike Page, he had only a brief political career of a few unhappy years in the Victorian Parliament.

in a position to do something about his goal of shaping Australia. Page was not just seeking more resources for the countryside (keen on this as he was): he actively promoted the rational application of regionalism, planning and technology. In this, he was a rare combination of the earthly and the dreamer, who saw himself as a statesman leading a grand cause that sat far above mere party politics.

A central premise of this thesis is that a biographically-based approach is vital to understanding and analysing the policy successes and failures of such a wide-ranging figure. Developmentalism helps us understand Page, but just as importantly his career casts light on the place of developmentalism in twentieth century Australia. Relating the particular to the general is an important role of biographical studies. As Australian political scientist and biographer Tracey Arklay suggests, “biography provides an alternative point of analysis to the workings of social groups, situations and events, which is the normal frame of reference for historical research.” It “can broaden, rather than reduce, an understanding of who got ‘what, when and how’”.<sup>12</sup> In Page’s case, seniority, tenacious advocacy and breadth of vision resulted in a life that enlivened many major issues. As one of Australia’s great optimists, he saw the nation as a tractable land of possibilities that a visionary like himself, dedicated to a very special conception of the greater good, had a public duty to try to realise. A biographical approach that traces his rich policy career and the reactions of those around him thus contributes to mapping how the Australian political imagination was capable of stretching beyond conventional politics to consider how the nation should be shaped in order to realise its potential. As has frequently been noted, visionaries often inadvertently tell us more about what they represent in their own present than the future they foresee.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Tracey Arklay, ‘Political Biography: Its Contribution to Political Science’, in Tracey Arklay, John Nethercote and John Wanna (eds.), *Australian Political Lives: Chronicling Political Careers and Administrative Histories*, ANU E Press, Canberra, 2006, p. 18. The quote’s last phrase alludes to Harold Laswell’s *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*, Peter Smith, New York, 1936.

<sup>13</sup> Such as noted by Ian Turner (ed.) in *The Australian Dream: A Collection of Anticipations about Australia from Captain Cook to the Present Day*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1968, p. ix.

That Page's various policy triumphs and failures extended across decades is a further reason for using his career to assess developmentalism. His political longevity illuminates important changes in the wider policy environment around him. Over time, his own Country Party gravitated towards conceptions of national development very different to Page's own views. There were also major changes in how policy was formulated within government, notably a post-Depression dominance of economic precepts with which Page lacked empathy. While 'rise and fall' is too simplistic a way of viewing Page's life, his career signals several significant transitions in the settings and institutions of Australian politics.

Analysis of Page's main policy initiatives will further address his interaction with the wider social and political movements he used to help galvanise this campaigning. Such contexts as the early Country Party, new state movements and attempts to harness the business world and the engineering profession, delineate what wider support (and opposition) his various causes elicited. Page's career embodies an important ongoing tension in Australian history. On the one hand, he can be seen as being in company with ardent developmentalists who thought that direct action could readily realise the nation's potential. On the other, he confronted realists in government and business who stressed the limitations of the natural environment and of government action. Competition between such hopeful and more sober conceptions of national development was one of the great debates of twentieth-century Australia, within which Page played the role of an especially tireless optimist.

The distinctiveness of Page's policy vision further enhances his value as a basis for wider historical assessment. It has been said that Australian politics has derived many of its animating ideas from European and American sources.<sup>14</sup> Although Page made enthusiastic use of international exemplars, this was highly selective. Fundamentally, he synthesised home-grown and international ideas into his own distinctively broad yet prescriptive

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Loveday, 'Australian Political Thought', in Richard Lucy (ed.), *The Pieces of Politics*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1979 (first published 1975), p. 2.

developmentalist vision of the entire nation, with the state setting the right initial conditions for development from which local communities and private interests would build infrastructure and nurture industries. The intensity and consistency of this vision over decades owed much to powerful personal formative experiences. Despite picturing himself as a rationalist, Page's commitment was essentially deeply emotional. This can only be fully understood by considering the lasting influence of his place of origin, family, religion and how early exposure to harsh rural living conditions fostered a resentment of big cities.

Page is also a significant example of an applied thinker functioning in a political context. Such figures feature in recent studies which have sought to broaden conceptions of the role of ideas in Australian public life. This includes work by James Walter and Tod Moore that touches on Country Party figures, notably Page himself, his energetic admirer Ulrich Ellis, and Page's confidant David Drummond. Moore calls Page an "inventive political strategist" and an "intellectual" of the Country Party.<sup>15</sup> Walter argues that scholars such as Peter Loveday placed too much emphasis on the local absence of canonical figures of the stature of Edmund Burke or John Stuart Mill, as against more applied thinkers such as L.F. Giblin, Elton Mayo and H.C. ('Nugget') Coombs. He notes in this context the concept of the organic intellectual who arises from and articulates the interests of a social class, organisation or cultural formation.<sup>16</sup> This concept, which originated with the Italian Marxist theoretician Antonio Gramsci, captures Page and many other members of the Australian intelligentsia as individuals who typically were applied in intent and deeply embedded in the political culture they sought to change. Such figures can be ideologically ambiguous, including Page the anti-socialist who simultaneously advocated strong national government. Studying Page's ideas contributes to understanding of Australia's applied intellectuals and their historical importance.

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<sup>15</sup> Tod Moore in James Walter with Tod Moore, *What Were They Thinking?: The Politics of Ideas in Australia*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2010, pp. 155-6.

<sup>16</sup> See also James Walter 'Intellectuals and the Political Culture', in Brian Head and James Walter (eds.), *Intellectual Movements and Australian Society*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988, pp. 240-1; and Walter with Moore, *ibid.*, pp. 27-8. Page would however have been repelled by the revolutionary context of Gramsci's thinking.

In taking a biographical approach, I seek to remain mindful of qualities listed by Jeffrey Meyers in *The Biographer's Art: New Essays*. Firstly, there is the need for “original research that casts new light on the subject” – this thesis draws heavily on Page’s personal papers and those of his associates, such as Ellis, that have only been sporadically used by historians. Secondly, such work should constitute “a complete and accurate synthesis of both public and private life” – although I do not dwell on Page’s private life, I consider the how personal origins shaped his lifelong outlook. Thirdly, biography demands “a perceptive interpretation of character”. Outlining Page’s policy campaigns highlights his distinctiveness as a personality and thinker. Fourthly, biographical narratives require “a sound dramatic structure that brings the pattern of life into focus” – which I seek by providing detailed accounts of Page’s more remarkable political initiatives. Fifthly, Meyers calls for “an evocation of the cultural background”. My study explores the political and cultural environments with which Page intersected, especially early in his career. Finally, there is the requirement for “an insightful evaluation of the subject’s achievement”, as “the real justification of the work”. I challenge assumptions about Page’s personal agenda and creativity, delineate his still relevant legacies in such issues as regionalism and federalism, and draw on his policy campaigns to cast light on both his and developmentalism’s place in Australian history.<sup>17</sup>

### **Page and the significance of Australian developmentalism**

Using Page to assess developmentalism also helps to improve understanding of the place in the Australian past of this important but little-studied concept.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey Meyers (ed.), *The Biographer's Art: New Essays*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1989, p. 1. Meyers also refers to “an elegant yet lively style.”

<sup>18</sup> The term developmentalism is not original to this thesis, but has not been widely used in the sense meant here. Peter Cochrane, for example, used it fleetingly in *Industrialisation and Dependence: Australia's Road to Economic Development*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1980, p. 11. A more fulsome instance is in Jillian Koshin’s 2009 biography of Tasmanian Premier and hydroelectricity enthusiast Eric Reece, *Electric Eric: The Life and Times of Eric Reece*, Bokprint, Launceston. She defines developmentalism as “The set of ideas which, in the name of progress, believes in, and promotes the establishment or growth of industry – particularly manufacturing and processing plants, power plants, and resource extraction”, p. 4. This includes associated infrastructure, government assistance and affirmation of a right to exploit natural resources. Developmentalism is also used by Greg Whitwell in a very broad sense in his contribution ‘Economic Policy’ to Scott Prasser, J.R. Nethercote and John Warhurst (eds.), *The Menzies Era: A Reappraisal of Government, Politics and Policy*, Hale &

Although developmentalism was not commonly used as a term in Page's time, the sentiments it encompasses predate him. The economic historian S.J. Butlin said that "development has, as it were, always been part of Australian religion since Arthur Phillip" and was identified with growth via "geographical spread and quantitative increase."<sup>19</sup> John Gascoigne wrote of how Australia came under European domination in "an age energised by the possibilities of 'improvement'" of the land, industry and of human nature itself. Australia was seen as "a piece of waste land writ large requiring to be brought into productive use."<sup>20</sup> Page himself in his first speech on a national stage described his central goal as being "The Development of Australia."<sup>21</sup> National development was the stated foremost task of the first government in which he held office. Prime Minister Bruce proclaimed himself "managing director of the greatest company in Australia, the Commonwealth Government, and its duty is to develop Australia."<sup>22</sup>

Developmentalism also has an important cultural dimension as an expression of national identity. Donald Horne described development as Australia's "secular faith," amounting to "a kind of patriotism" – "development for its own sake", in fact.<sup>23</sup> This faith stretched across the party political divide: shortly after Page's death, Arthur Calwell wrote of development as "a unique nationalism" and of the "unanimity that exists on the *need* for national

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Iremonger, Sydney, 1995, pp. 169, 179. Whitwell's use of the term encompasses less interventionist policies such as attracting foreign investment into resource-based industries. Quite differently, the term is also applied to economic theory advocating growth in developing economies through fostering strong internal markets and imposing high import tariffs.

<sup>19</sup> S.J. Butlin, 'The Role of Planning in Australian Economic Development', in *Economic Papers No 15 – Planned and Unplanned Development*, The Economic Society of Australia and New Zealand, Sydney, 1962, p. 12. Other reflections on the prevalence of developmentalism in Australia include J.D.B. Miller in *Australian Government and Politics: An Introductory Survey*, Duckworth, London, 1954; "Australian propaganda has traditionally represented it as a land of boundless resources, only waiting for people and capital to release its energies", p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> John Gascoigne (with the assistance of Patricia Curthoys), *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 70.

<sup>21</sup> Earle Page, *A Plea for Unification: The Development of Australia*, Grafton, 1917. This is the published text of his speech to the Australasian Provincial Press Association conference of 13 August 1917.

<sup>22</sup> Bruce speaking in 1928, quoted in Donald Horne, *Money Made Us*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1976, p. 134.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 133, 134.

development.”<sup>24</sup> It also extended into the business world and civic movements which Page tried to harness to his policy goals, attracting such varied contacts of his as industrialist and planner Herbert Gepp, and the Tamworth-based journalist and new state enthusiast, Victor (V.C.) Thompson.

Developmentalism was especially strong in Page’s habitual milieu of rural-based politics as it was seen as favouring public investment in rural infrastructure and services that promoted equality between city and bush.<sup>25</sup>

John Hirst, in his riposte to Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend*, saw Australian nationalism as having a base in a pioneer legend that celebrates national development achieved through the harnessing of the land.<sup>26</sup> In the early twenty-first century the journalist Paul Kelly could still write of nation-building as “a brand that resonates with Australia’s political culture, where everybody thinks nation building equates with motherhood.”<sup>27</sup>

Yet most overview histories of modern Australia have only fleetingly addressed the many and varied developmentalist goals that were so dear to Page and many others. N.G. Butlin, Barnard and Pincus produced a strong survey of the twentieth-century Australian economy, but stressed the interaction of the private and public sectors rather than ideas about national development.<sup>28</sup> Ian Turner pointed out in a 1968 anthology that visions of a future Australia had been decidedly worldly ones but focused his selection on political radicals and nationalists, not developmentalists.<sup>29</sup> Histories of Australian economic thought address reactions to Keynesianism demand management theory, not such overtly applied concepts of national development as the regionalism, decentralisation, electrification<sup>30</sup> and planning that attracted Page.<sup>30</sup> Geoffrey

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<sup>24</sup> A.A. Calwell, *Labor’s Role in Modern Society*, Lansdowne Press, Melbourne, 1963, pp. 16, 134. Calwell’s italics, used to draw a contrast with disagreement on *methods* for promoting development.

<sup>25</sup> Geoffrey Stokes, ‘A Rejoinder’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 39, no. 1, March 2004, p. 45. Stokes attributes this point to Judith Brett.

<sup>26</sup> John Hirst, ‘The Pioneer Legend’ in John Carroll (ed.), *Intruders in the Bush: The Australian Quest for Identity*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1982, pp. 14-37.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Kelly, ‘Building from the Base’, *The Australian*, 28 October 2009.

<sup>28</sup> N.G. Butlin, A. Barnard and J.J. Pincus, *Government and Capitalism: Public and Private Choice in Twentieth Century Australia*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1982.

<sup>29</sup> Turner, *op. cit.*, pp. ix-x.

<sup>30</sup> A good example is Alex Millmow’s otherwise highly informative *The Power of Economic Ideas: The Origins of Keynesian Macroeconomic Management in Interwar Australia 1929-39*, ANU E Press, Canberra, 2010. One exception is Geoffrey Stokes, who sees standard

Serle surveyed Australian nationalism and nation-building largely in terms of high culture, such as Bernard O'Dowd's 1912 poem 'The Bush' – a prophetic spiritual nationalism that is a far cry from the applied developmentalism of Page and others.<sup>31</sup>

Broad as developmentalism is, a pervasive feature within it is that government is seen as playing a decisive role by applying policy that would realise a remarkable national economic potential. Bruce, for example, said that Australia's natural resources "if brought to full development would probably solve most of the economic problems that face the world today."<sup>32</sup> Another common feature is that despite developmentalism's ideological nature, its advocates commonly employed a language of disdain for impractical abstraction (regardless of the dubious viability of many projects they proposed). Development was often also portrayed as a means of sustaining high rates of migration and ultimately a bigger population more capable of defending such a large nation: "unless we peopled Australia rapidly and developed our resources we should expose ourselves to physical assault" agreed Page.<sup>33</sup> At times this was linked to imperialist sentiments by being cast as improving capacity to absorb population overflow from the Mother Country, notably during the Bruce-Page era of the 1920s. The means of planning all such national development was often ill-defined. Commenting a year after Page's death, S.J. Butlin perceived planning in Australia as merely "the general acceptance of a rather vaguely defined line of advance...with the 'planning' only acquiring definite objectives and real content at the level of specific plans, commonly plans of limited scope and with limited time horizons."<sup>34</sup>

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portrayals of the Deakinite Australian Settlement as tending "to overlook or reduce the significance of contesting traditions and political alternatives", and so argues for the addition of components including "state developmentalism" in which the state is accorded a central role in economic development; see Geoffrey Stokes, 'The 'Australian Settlement' and Australian Political Thought', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 39, no. 1, March 2004, pp. 6, 14-5.

<sup>31</sup> Geoffrey Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come: The Creative Spirit in Australia 1788-1972*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1972, pp. 69-71.

<sup>32</sup> W.A. Sinclair, 'Capital Formation' in C. Forster (ed.), *Australian Economic Development in the Twentieth Century*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, and Australasian Publishing Company, Sydney, 1970, p. 24.

<sup>33</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

<sup>34</sup> S.J. Butlin, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

Charting reactions over time to Page's developmentalist campaigning will test the validity of frequent assumptions that the Australian people and their governments long had a resolute commitment to nation-building through large, visionary projects, and that this trait dwindled only during the late twentieth century. This will also help assess how developmentalist thought changed. Early in Page's public career, the dominant form of developmentalism was that centred on rural development and which assumed that a nation as vast as Australia could surely exploit hitherto underutilised land. This encouraged assistance for migrants to settle on the land and related plans to harness rivers for irrigation – “‘water’ and ‘development’ have been inseparable terms for most of the short history of non-Aboriginal settlement in Australia” wrote geographer J.M. Powell.<sup>35</sup> Page drew from this practice of seeing water resources as a key to national development, but differed from most other “water dreamers” by stressing ultimate goals of decentralisation and regionalisation enabled more by hydroelectricity than by irrigation.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, a detailed study of Page's developmentalist campaigning during the Bruce-Page years helps assess an emerging perception that this was a period of policy innovation. Until recently, historians did not see these peak years of his in such terms. Serle referred to a “miserable decade” culturally, as part of a wider 1900-30 period during which social experimentation stalled. Stuart Macintyre wrote of the Bruce-Page government as having “made little use of the new broom” as “the lines of national policy were too firmly established.”<sup>37</sup> More recently, historians such as Frank Bongiorno have begun to identify major innovations during this period.<sup>38</sup> Intellectual debate on Australian development reached a high point in the interwar years, spurred on by concern that the

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<sup>35</sup> J.M. Powell, *Plains of Promise, Rivers of Destiny: Water Management and the Development of Queensland 1824-1990*, Boolarong, Brisbane, 1991, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> For an outline history of water dreaming, see Michael Cathcart, *The Water Dreamers: The Remarkable History of Our Dry Continent*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2009. Cathcart does not mention Page.

<sup>37</sup> Serle, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-1, 102; Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1999, p. 167.

<sup>38</sup> Frank Bongiorno ‘Search for a solution, 1923-39’ in Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Australia*, volume 2, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2013, pp. 65-8. David Lee in chapter three of his *Stanley Melbourne Bruce: Australian Internationalist*, Continuum, London, 2010, also provides a largely positive interpretation, especially with regard to Commonwealth-state relations.

nation was underperforming relative to its potential. Much of this debate revolved around tariffs and dispute over limits to land exploitation. The most widely known developmentalist tract, Edwin Brady's 1918 *Australia Unlimited*, eponymously saw no such limits. The controversial geographer Thomas Griffith Taylor responded by pointing to environmental constraints in central and northern Australia, while foresters warned of continued deforestation.<sup>39</sup> Intense policy and intellectual discussions on development based on land use, regionalism, electrification, planning and federalism continued right through the interwar years and beyond, with Page a vigorous participant.

### **Page the individual: issues and historiography**

Page's political status makes him also of considerable inherent interest. Why, amongst would-be nation-shapers, did he constitute a rare exception who held high office for decades as a party leader and minister? And how was it that he nonetheless failed to keep his own Country Party enthused for his ideas, especially in the post-World War Two era? Such issues lead into analysis of the historical contexts and political cultures that influenced Page's effectiveness as a policy-maker, including the rise of rural discontent after the Great War, the emergence of the Country Party and new state campaigns, and the increasing use by governments of economic policy expertise.

Page was involved in some unconventional initiatives that cast light on these questions and his *modus operandi*. This thesis examines two of the more ambitious in detail – the 1931-32 campaign to separate northern New South Wales unilaterally from the rest of the state, and Page's 1938-39 attempt to establish powerful machinery for national economic planning. The latter briefly had the attention of the Commonwealth and all state governments, yet is only

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<sup>39</sup> Edwin J. Brady, *Australia Unlimited*, G. Robertson, Melbourne, 1918; also Gregory Barton and Brett Bennett, 'The environment', in Bashford and Macintyre, volume 2, *op. cit.*, pp. 461-2. Taylor was so controversial a figure that in 1928 he departed Australia to pursue his career in Chicago. Daisy Bates saw him as slandering British pioneers – "Surely the spirit of the British adventurer is not dead; it is only doped in these times with the pabulums administered by faddists, jazzists, and other 'futilities'"; see J.M. Powell, *Griffith Taylor and "Australia Unlimited"*, the John Murtagh Macrossan lecture 1992, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1993, p. 26.

fleetingly mentioned in histories of the period. It is the prime example of Page's self-belief as a nation-shaper: its failure helps mark the start of his decline.

Looking closely at Page the individual helps provide a nuanced sense of his role in history, while remaining cognisant of the limits of his influence. Aitkin's description of Page as the most under-regarded federal politician remains a minority view amongst historians. This is reflected in the absence prior to this thesis of a full-length study other than Page's memoir, *Truant Surgeon*. Most assessments – or assumptions, in some cases – are at odds with Page's powerfully idiosyncratic persona and wider significance. Ross Fitzgerald wrote of Page's "intellectual weaknesses" being exploited when in 1927 he found himself confronted on economic policy by the new federal Labor parliamentarian E.G. Theodore.<sup>40</sup> A.W. Martin described Page as having "personified the limitations of a country surgeon and businessman", and as "a plodder at best."<sup>41</sup> In fact, Page transcended his small town background by virtue of his quick mind and ambitious policy vision, as is clearly evident in his policy campaigns.

Page's brief tenure as Prime Minister also influences assessments, usually to his detriment. Political scientist Malcolm Mackerras marked Page down in prime ministerial ranking on the grounds that unlike another Country Party caretaker in the office, John McEwen, he failed to successfully dictate to the majority party about his successor.<sup>42</sup> He is often summed up as canny – a "born intriguer" wrote Barry Jones.<sup>43</sup> Historian Fred Alexander saw Hughes and Bruce rather than Page as leading promoters of applied science, despite Page's strong interest in this field and his almost certainly being the first senior

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<sup>40</sup> Ross Fitzgerald, *Red Ted: The Life of E.G. Theodore*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1994, p. 200.

<sup>41</sup> A.W. Martin, *Robert Menzies: A Life, Volume 1, 1894-1943*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, 1993, pp. 123, 279.

<sup>42</sup> Malcolm Mackerras, 'Menzies the Top Bob Amid the Greats', *The Australian*, August 16 2008. In 2010 Mackerras rated Page as "low average"; see 'Ranking Australia's Prime Ministers', *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 25 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Barry Jones, 'Leadership: Ranking our Prime Ministers', *The Weekend Australian*, 12-13 June 1996, p. 25.

Commonwealth Cabinet minister with scientific training.<sup>44</sup> Even other prominent developmentalists have said little of him. In 1982, the manufacturing industrialist Barton Pope called for a National Planning Council, evidently without realising that Page tried to create such a body in 1938-39. Pope listed Australia's great developmental visionaries as including Alfred Deakin, John Forrest, Playford, John Curtin and Chifley – but not the less conventional Page.<sup>45</sup>

The failure of histories of the Country Party to delineate Page's full national vision or address what his career implies for Australian history constitutes a further gap. Foremost of these is B.D. Graham's otherwise outstanding *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, published in 1966. This exhaustive study of the labyrinthine steps leading to the party's emergence as a national force addresses the role of rural ideology, but limits its discussion of associated policy to accounts of new state movements and primary produce marketing schemes. It misleadingly casts Page in 1929 as one of a crop of Country Party leaders "who prided themselves on being good administrators and conventional politicians."<sup>46</sup> Ulrich Ellis's *A History of the Australian Country Party* is valuable as an outline of events, but is more descriptive than interpretative. Its chapter-long profile of Page is highly perceptive as a character study yet bears signs of Ellis having been his foremost follower, especially in its treatment of new states.<sup>47</sup> Paul Davey's later Country Party histories provide invaluable clear overviews of party organisation and political

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<sup>44</sup> Fred Alexander, *Australia Since Federation: A Narrative and Critical Analysis*, Thomas Nelson, West Melbourne, third edition, 1976, (first published 1967), pp. 65-7, 269. A check using the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* of members of the Barton ministry, the Reid ministry, the Watson ministry, the second Deakin ministry, the third Fisher ministry, the Hughes Nationalist ministry and the first Bruce ministry does not reveal any scientists, engineers or medical practitioners other than Page. Some medical practitioners served as federal backbench MPs, including Charles Carty Salmon who was Speaker 1909-10.

<sup>45</sup> Barton Pope, 'Planning for the Next One Hundred Years', in Barton Pope, Macfarlane Burnet and Mark Oliphant, *Challenge to Australia*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1982, p. 10.

<sup>46</sup> B.D. Graham, *The Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1966, p. 290.

<sup>47</sup> Ulrich Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, 1963.

events but are less comprehensive on the ideas held by its members, including Page.<sup>48</sup>

This thesis presents a political life, but not a politician's whole life. It does not constitute a full biography covering all aspects of Page's long career in equal detail. It is important that a biographical study not assemble such a mass of material as to obscure the significance of its subject. The focus here is on core elements of Page's prescriptions for the nation and his distinctive role in wider national debates – hence the emphasis on regionalism and decentralisation, electrification, co-operative federalism, planning and rural education. There is less detail on Page's engagements with health policy, national insurance, central banking and international trade negotiations. All were fields in which he played a prominent but less original role. National insurance schemes, for example, had wide support within coalition governments in which Page served (including from Robert Menzies in the late 1930s). Coverage of Page as Treasurer focuses on his contribution to shifting the balance of Commonwealth-state financial relations. Health policy is dealt with mainly to the extent that it reflected his ideas on co-operative federalism and establishes his place in the second Menzies government.

This thesis also does not dwell on aspects of his career already well documented in secondary sources. Early steps towards central banking, with which Page had a significant involvement, have been addressed by L.F. Giblin and Robin Gollan.<sup>49</sup> Page's central role in establishing subsidised private health insurance in the 1950s has been analysed by James A. Gillespie.<sup>50</sup> Page's 1941-42 service as Australian Minister in London, a colourful (and stressful) interlude that involved membership of Churchill's War Cabinet, is

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<sup>48</sup> Paul Davy, *The Nationals: The Progressive Party, Country and National Party in New South Wales 1919 to 2006*, The Federation Press, Leichhardt, 2006; and *Ninety Not Out: The Nationals 1920-2010*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2010.

<sup>49</sup> L.F. Giblin, *The Growth of a Central Bank: The Development of the Commonwealth Bank of Australia 1924-1945*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, 1951; Robin Gollan, *The Commonwealth Bank of Australia: Origins and Early History*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1968.

<sup>50</sup> James A. Gillespie, *The Price of Health: Australian Governments and Medical Politics 1910-1960*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1991; see especially chapter 11, 'Private Practice, Publicly Funded: the Page Health Scheme'.

covered in summary with an emphasis on Page's proposal for a new international trading regime and the implications for his hopes of guiding the post-war reconstruction policies of the Curtin and Chifley governments. As the main vehicle for Page's political standing and developmentalist ambitions, the Country Party receives considerable attention in this thesis, but with an emphasis on its interaction with Page's policy aims, especially the implications of changes in party culture. Page saw himself as a dedicated party man, but not in the tribal sense of unthinking loyalty. He was more consistently faithful to issues that he implored the Country Party to uphold, including regionalism and hydroelectricity. It is significant that at times he tried to work with the Australian Labor Party (ALP) leadership, such as on planning.

### **Sources used**

This thesis draws primarily, but far from entirely, on Page's personal papers in the National Library of Australia (NLA), a rich but disorganised collection. This extensive holding includes Cabinet papers, press clippings, speeches, Country Party council minutes, published pamphlets, maps and early drafts of Page's memoirs. They show Page to have been an enthusiastic letter writer, especially to personal contacts outside parliament. Some major policy documents, including Cabinet papers, are unattributed, but a distinctively intense style and repetition of such characteristic phrases as "it is obvious" indicate Page's authorship.

The Page papers amount to a comprehensive record of his policy campaigns. Documents range in significance from Page's historic agreement with Bruce on the first coalition between the Country Party and the Nationalist Party, down to hotel receipts. This massive collection has only recently been re-catalogued, long after commencement of work on this thesis. Prior to this, its poor organisation was surely a barrier to considered assessments of the man. The Page papers are somewhat skewed towards the post-World War Two years. They are, for example, not especially strong on Page's part in negotiating the 1927 Financial Agreement. A smaller body of Page papers held in the

University of New England (UNE) and Regional Archives has a focus on Page's early life and engagement with new statism.

Sources on Page's associates help impart a broader sense of his campaigning. These include the personal papers of such activists as Ellis held at the NLA and UNE, and the David Drummond papers at UNE. Records of wider movements of Page's time have also been drawn upon, notably those at UNE concerning new state campaigns and the Country Party's papers in the NLA. Official papers consulted in the National Archives of Australia (NAA) include minutes of Premiers' Conferences, investigations by the Commonwealth government's Development and Migration Commission, records relating to the Australian Agricultural Council and other Commonwealth-state co-ordinating bodies, and correspondence on post-war reconstruction. Material and comments on Page's family and early life were very helpfully contributed by his granddaughter, Helen Snyders.

Foremost among published primary sources used is *Truant Surgeon*. This book appeared posthumously in 1963, and remains the most vibrant and purposeful of Australian prime ministerial autobiographies. Page intended it to contribute to a personal legacy of policy ideas, but his messages are presented amidst a mass of reminiscences. It is strongest as a source on his formative experiences, and later as a young doctor and pioneering Country Party MP. Page presents himself as proudly conscious of the influences of family tradition and place of origin on his efforts to contribute to community and nation. He relates his political career as a series of struggles to implement his ideas on hydroelectricity, new states and federalism, with other passages addressing health policy, central banking and wartime service. The title alludes to Page's portrayal of himself as an apolitical figure who wandered into national politics by little more than chance. Historians have made only fleeting use of *Truant Surgeon*, most often for its account of Page's early years.<sup>51</sup> Graham found it

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<sup>51</sup> See for example Gavin Souter, *Acts of Parliament: A Narrative History of Australia's Federal Legislature*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, 1988, pp. 184-5; and Robert Murray, *The Confident Years: Australia in the Twenties*, Allen Lane, Ringwood, 1978, pp. 40-1.

“most valuable” for insights into Page’s view of his career, despite some lack of accuracy.<sup>52</sup>

Further published primary sources are Ellis’s memoirs, *A Pen in Politics*; other political memoirs including by McEwen; pamphlets and larger monographs produced by proponents of developmentalist ideas, such as the proceedings of Australian Institute of Political Science summer schools; and a diverse range of periodicals that record contemporary debates, including *The Land*, *New State Magazine* and *Australian Quarterly*.<sup>53</sup> Secondary sources on developmentalism are few and limited in scope: those on electrification, for example, are mostly histories of individual Australian utilities and accounts of electrification in North America and Europe.

### **Thesis structure**

This thesis is primarily organised along chronological lines, focusing on changing contexts as political and policy environments evolved during Page’s life. An essentially chronological structure is also compatible with his tactical adaptability. Page pursued different issues at particular times according to what was politically opportune, stressing, for example, regionalism in the mid-1920s when the new state movement peaked. In the late 1930s, he pursued economic planning as preparations for war and the illness of Lyons presented him with a rare opportunity. In the latter 1940s he campaigned to dam the Clarence River as a post-war reconstruction initiative. An additional reason for a chronological approach is that Page’s various goals were so intertwined they cannot be readily separated out. Planning was a means of developing rural infrastructure, including hydroelectric power schemes, which provided a productive basis for regional governance and decentralisation; education could help build rural civic cultures supportive of development; and co-operative

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<sup>52</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 297. Graham preferred Ellis’s *A History of the Australian Country Party* as an account of early party history.

<sup>53</sup> Ulrich Ellis, *A Pen in Politics*, Ginninderra Press, Charnwood, 2007; John McEwen, *John McEwen: His Story*, edited by R.V. Jackson, privately published, place of publication n.a., 1983.

federalism was a basis for implementing Page's policies nationally, such as a nationwide transport system.

The structure for this thesis is:

Chapter 1) Page's formative experiences: the making of a world view.

Understanding why certain ideas took such firm root in Page's outlook is a basis for better appreciation of his determination to shape Australia and difficulty in adjusting to political change. His 1917 speech to the Australasian Provincial Press Association encapsulates what became his longstanding vision of the nation. Page was deeply influenced by his family's tradition of civic engagement and the Clarence River region setting of his upbringing. The personality which emerged from all this had a deeply emotive commitment to a very prescriptive policy vision for the entire nation.

Chapter 2) Page's rise to national prominence. Page's entry into federal parliament in 1919 and rapid rise to political leadership owed much to such policy debates as new statism and to developments in the party system that led to the creation of the Country Party and its coalition with the Nationalists. Page's visions of regionalism, decentralisation and co-operative federalism were largely compatible with the priorities of the Commonwealth ministry led by Stanley Bruce, especially the importance it attached to overhauling federalism. The speed with which Page established himself as a power within a still formative Country Party placed him in a strong position to pursue his personal policy agenda, and to play a major part in making the 1920s a decade of new national policies that sought to shape Australian governance, society and the economy.

Chapter 3) Treasurer Page pursues his policy vision: hydroelectricity, new states and rural roads. Page used his status as Commonwealth Treasurer to pursue personal goals concerning these three fields, making him a major influence on what policy ideas were current. He went well beyond what was sought by other rural activists, such as by seeking to create regionalised

structures of government across the nation. This chapter assesses the effectiveness with which he advanced these commitments.

Chapter 4) Page's standing in government and party: the basis of his power.

The priorities and dynamics of the Bruce-Page government and the early Country Party during this period of political transition created opportunities for Page to pursue his form of developmentalism. Events in the mid-1920s were especially important, when Page decisively defended the coalition and shifted policy power in the Country Party towards himself.

Chapter 5) Page's last years in the Bruce-Page government: challenging the nation through planning and federalism.

Page's policy attention in the latter 1920s shifted towards planning the economy, encouraged by the creation of the Development and Migration Commission. He also played a major role in the Bruce-Page government's success in reforming fiscal federalism, including the creation of the Loan Council that he adopted as an exemplar for co-operative policy reform. Despite the comprehensiveness of the government's defeat in 1929, Page's first experience of office left him with a sense of possibilities and a set of ideas concerning planning and federalism that lastingly influenced his approach to many different national policy issues.

Chapter 6) The 1930s, Page's most mixed decade.

During this decade of Depression followed by austerity-based recovery, Page's focus shifted as he seized upon a series of different chances to implement dearly-held ideas that otherwise sat outside the mainstream of government policy. In doing so, he made important contributions to national political debate and displayed tactical flexibility as the leading advocate of fundamental change in a succession of fields: regionalism, notably during an unexpected opportunity in 1931-32 to create a new state; co-operative federalism, leading to the creation of the Australian Agricultural Council; electrification, linked to trade policy and to Commonwealth co-operation with New South Wales; rural-based higher education, via the campaign to establish a university in New England; and, finally, national economic planning, leading to his 1938-39 attempt to create a National Council of Commonwealth and state ministers. The new state and

planning initiatives are particularly indicative of Page's ability to lead national agendas and of his political *modus operandi*. His unsuccessful planning initiative may have contributed to his fall from power in 1939.

Chapter 7) Post-war Page: hopes amidst frustrations. Page's difficult post-World War Two experience presents a sharp contrast with his inter-war peak years. In wartime he made ambitious attempts to reform world trade and to lead constitutional reform, and developed high expectations of a major role in post-war reconstruction. But under the Chifley government, Page faced the frustrating paradox of a political climate that elevated his favoured policy themes to national policy amidst a new policy-making and political environment within which he struggled for influence. He was nonetheless able to induce governments to react to his persistence, especially his championing of harnessing the Clarence River for hydroelectricity. Page was the most outspoken non-Labor advocate of the possibilities of post-war reconstruction.

Chapter 8) Page indefatigable: his last years in public life. During the 1950s, Page tried to exert influence amidst changes in the Country Party and a different coalition government from those in which he had (relatively) flourished earlier. Although he envisioned himself as the new Menzies government's foremost developmentalist, he found little in its policies to work with other than flirtations with national planning. But even if he did not exercise influence to the extent that he hoped, Page again kept some ideas alive by inciting reactions and attracting publicity. After leaving the ministry in early 1956, he effectively became an autonomous MP determined to leave a personal legacy by championing constitutional reform and the damming of the Clarence River, earning him a public image as the elder statesman of national development.

My Conclusion considers what Page's story suggests for the role of ideas in Australian political culture. I reflect on Page himself – his influence and formidable legacy on issues that include regionalism, co-operative federalism and planning; why he struggled to implement his full agenda; and how his successes and failures cast light on his strategic place in history. Page is seen as an important example of how assessment of the life of an influential

individual and the ideas they upheld can illuminate the wider past and the present.

In sum, this thesis presents the life and thought of one of Australia's most remarkable visionaries; argues for his importance both in himself and for what he implies for Australian developmentalism; and seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the place of ideas about national development in Australian politics and history.

## **CHAPTER 1 – PAGE’S FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES: THE MAKING OF A WORLD VIEW**

Earle Page’s family background and early life fostered an emotional core that lastingly influenced his concept of economic and social development. Studies of political thinkers and participants typically stress public careers, not private lives. “None of us can enter into another person’s mind”, wrote Bernard Crick in his celebrated life of George Orwell.<sup>1</sup> But it is important to consider why certain ideas took firm root in a subject’s outlook as a means of better understanding how they drove his or her public actions. In Page’s case, unwavering adherence to a highly prescriptive worldview points to powerful formative experiences that underlay the tenacity and lack of reflectiveness with which he pursued his favoured issues. He was to uphold these over decades, despite changes in the policy environment, the growing indifference of party colleagues and his mixed success in having them implemented.

Page consistently attested to early influences as the basis of his ideas: a family tradition of community service, particularly in education; his happy upbringing in Grafton, which inspired his faith in small communities; rural isolation which bred resentment of the big cities; and his exposure to new technologies that promised social improvement. The following exploration of his life up to his return from the Great War in 1917 covers each of these major influences on his efforts to shape Australia as a nation. The scene is set by recounting Page’s first major policy statement on a national stage.

### **Alderman Page states his world view: his debut on the national stage**

Few senior Australian political figures of the early twentieth century opened their public career by stating a comprehensive policy vision for the nation: even fewer remained largely faithful to it over decades. Page announced his vision in a speech to a conference of the Australasian Provincial Press Association in Brisbane on 13 August 1917. He participated as delegate of the Grafton-based

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1982 (first published 1980), p. 30.

*Daily Examiner*, of which he was part-owner. One hundred and fifty proprietors, editors and journalists attended from Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. Page had their attention for ninety minutes, well over the half-hour originally allotted.<sup>2</sup> In *Truant Surgeon* he recalled his oration as “an embodiment of my thinking on national aspects of development, the basic concepts of which I have upheld to this day.”<sup>3</sup> The speech was a precocious call by a small town alderman to reform the governance of the entire nation, and a standout in a conference otherwise preoccupied with such issues as wartime paper shortages. It reflects the depth of Page’s attachment to his place of origin and thrusting impatience with constraints on Australia’s unrealised potential.<sup>4</sup>

Page’s foremost premise was that “there is no doubt that the present system of government in this land does not make for its development.”<sup>5</sup> This arose from “centralisation,” described by Page simply as an “evil.” The concentration of government in state capital cities meant that “public money is always expended in that corner where the seat of government is constituted.”<sup>6</sup> Infrastructure and social amenities should instead improve rural living standards and so support the redistribution of population and industry into the countryside.

Underpinning decentralisation was regional political control. This reflected Page’s most fundamental belief – the inherent tendency of small-scale communities to foster civic co-operation and engagement that would encourage social and economic development. Much of his wider thought was based on this premise. Page would become well known as an advocate of new states, but these were but a move in the direction of smaller federal units (as he often termed them) that would more thoroughly decentralise political and economic control. These federal units were to be “big enough to attack national schemes in a large way, but small enough for every legislator to be thoroughly

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<sup>2</sup> Earle Page, *A Plea for Unification*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> The *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* (Renmark, South Australia) of 7 September 1917, p. 17, gives a full summary of the conference. Page, incidentally, expressed little interest in this speech or in later pronouncements in *Aboriginal Australians*.

<sup>5</sup> Page, *A Plea for Unification*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

conversant with every portion of the area, and land settlement and proper development will naturally follow.”<sup>7</sup>

Paradoxically, Page simultaneously wanted a strong “Central National Government” under which “men will begin to think in terms of the continent of Australia as a whole, rather than of their state.”<sup>8</sup> State parliaments had a “parochial outlook.” Such a national government could set Australia-wide policies but devolve their implementation to his federal units, and would be better able to meet international obligations as a member of the British Empire.<sup>9</sup> Although this 1917 speech was entitled ‘A Plea for Unification’, Page recalled in his memoirs that at that time unification signified a true federal system with a national government strong only in “fields of common significance throughout Australia” – land policy, taxation, education, immigration and transport – leaving regional authorities to carry out major works locally.<sup>10</sup>

Page called for a two-stage reform process to realise his mixed regional and national vision – unification of the nation under a central government, followed by the “consequent subdivision of the whole of this Commonwealth into small self-governing areas, with local legislatures of men who know well the needs and resources of their respective districts.”<sup>11</sup> He linked this national regionalisation to the successful settlement of returned soldiers, an appealing selling point at that time. One notable divergence from his later pronouncements on regionalism was that in 1917 Page the private citizen was willing to strike a militant note in public. If the existing overlap between state and federal governments continued “there must be ultimately civil war.”<sup>12</sup>

Page’s advocacy drew strongly on his deep personal attachment to the Clarence Valley. He incorporated this into his national outlook by casting his home area as a potential model for the entire country. Page told the assembled press that although the Clarence Valley was nearly the size of

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.3-4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 445.

<sup>11</sup> Page, *A Plea for Unification*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Victoria, with “millions of acres of fertile soil, power possibilities unsurpassed in Australia, and mineral wealth untold”, it lacked schools, hospitals and other basic services. Yet in Victoria, “self-government has added everything that makes for physical, mental and moral development...cities, universities, well-equipped hospitals, technical schools and 5,000 miles of railways.” Properly administered, the Clarence region “could easily maintain the whole of the present population of Australia” and “no doubt, many other areas in Australia could do the same thing under favourable conditions of self-government.”<sup>13</sup>

Page’s strategy for decentralisation was influenced by his hopes for rural electrification using hydroelectricity. This had been a Page policy passion for several years prior to this speech and was linked to his admiration of the Clarence River, “the noblest stream flowing to the east coast of Australia” but where “unique power waiting for development has been allowed to run to waste.”<sup>14</sup> Page was to conduct a life-long campaign to dam the Clarence as the first of a series of regionally-controlled hydropower schemes across the nation. In this, he was in good company: internationally during the early twentieth century, dams came to be seen as the epitome of progress by promising “a renewable resource, furnishing power and water indefinitely.”<sup>15</sup> As of 1917, Page’s technological vision also encompassed railways under “Federal control, [which] with intelligent provincial advice, will ensure the proper linking up of the various provincial railway systems, and promote the opening up of all classes of land now absolutely unused.”<sup>16</sup> Page’s hopes for better rural services also covered education to support decentralisation and civic awareness. He decried the paucity of educational facilities in the Clarence region, where “there is scarcely a technical school in the whole area...[and]...scarcely a secondary school.”<sup>17</sup> In future years, Page was to broaden this interest in education to advocate a network of small-scale rural universities.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America’s Cold War Battle*, Massachusetts, 2010, p. 119.

<sup>16</sup> Page, *A Plea for Unification*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

National economic planning became Page's main means of initiating decentralisation. He did not advocate a command economy, but instead an indicative approach involving planning of infrastructure and incentives for new industries that would trigger a self-sustaining "reproductive process" of development. Page only implicitly suggested planning in his 1917 speech by calling for a national government with a comprehensive development agenda, but made his views clearer over coming years.

Finally, the reform of federalism would enable the Commonwealth and the states to co-ordinate national policies associated with all of the above themes. Page's career was peppered with proposals to have these two main levels of government work in unison, the next best thing to outright national planning. In 1917 he spoke particularly bluntly of an Australian Constitution that imposed "such formidable cracks in the national edifice as to threaten its collapse." Page attributed the Constitution's weakness to its having been drafted in a time of peace, whereas those of the United States and of Canada reflected fear of war: in Canada, "no doubt was left about the Federal Government alone being concerned with the ultimate power." Drafting of the Australian Constitution had been beset by "petty ambitions of the state politicians", leading to "a bastard Constitution...which has left the National Government continually at the mercy of the states." Hence "the only thing for Australia to do was to throw the whole Constitution into the melting-pot, and re-mould it in the light of the experience gained during the past 17 years."<sup>18</sup>

His 1917 speech also contains early indications of policies on federalism that he later pursued in government. He anticipated "the Federalising of State debts" as a step towards a new federal system, an important feature of the 1927 Financial Agreement between the Commonwealth and the states that is often touted as Page's finest achievement.<sup>19</sup> In a series of press articles a few months after this 1917 speech, he observed that unlike other Allied nations and Germany, in "Australia alone has no attempt been made at national industrial organisation", due to "the present chaotic system of seven different,

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

overlapping and conflicting sets of laws and industrial tribunals” – foreshadowing the issue that felled the Bruce-Page government twelve years later.<sup>20</sup>

Reactions to this speech would have given the ever-optimistic Page the impression of a receptive audience. The city press paid little attention, but his comments were reproduced across rural Australia in such publications as the *Singleton Argus*, the *Cairns Post* and the New South Wales-wide *Farmer and Settler*. It was also helpfully distributed in booklet form by Page’s *Daily Examiner*. The secretary of the Australasian Provincial Press Association and owner of the *Grafton Argus*, T.M. Shakespeare, was moved to advise Page to build a network of rural newspapers that would eventually “have a far reaching effect upon future policies of the Commonwealth.”<sup>21</sup>

This speech stands as an early indicator that Page had a very distinct mind indeed, and only approximately fitted into emerging rural protest movements. Page’s synthesis of ideas is largely consistent with the definition of an ideology as “a systematic and all-embracing political doctrine which claims to give a complete and universally applicable theory of man and society, and to derive therefrom a programme of political action.”<sup>22</sup> His concepts of community, decentralisation and national leadership had sufficiently wide application to reach consistent conclusions on many different political and social issues, and also – in their own logics – to be resistant to rebuttal. This helps explain his persistence. Page was not advocating mere policies with conclusively achievable aims, but something that could be applied universally and endlessly. He judged most new ideas according to their compatibility with his established principles. Page here provided a major variant of Australia as a social laboratory “in which the state was seen not as the enemy of individual freedom...but as the enabler of freedom.”<sup>23</sup> This concept is usually associated

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<sup>20</sup> *Daily Examiner*, 3 November 1917, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Mitchell Shakespeare to Page, 21 August 1917, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 7, folder 4, quoted in Sally Collier, ‘Earle Christmas Grafton Page: A Doctor for the Nation’, *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal*, vol. 39, 1996, p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Scruton, *The Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Political Thought*, third edition, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2007 (first published 1982), p. 217.

<sup>23</sup> Cathcart, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

with Alfred Deakin and the early post-Federation era. Page had a vision just as Deakin did, but one based on a very different world view.

The next seven chapters of this thesis seek to demonstrate how Page sought to implement these ideas of 1917 over the following four decades. Changes in his views were more of strategy than of fundamentals as he adopted new arguments for old positions to match the shifting political environment. The account of Page's personal origins that follows below establishes the basis for this remarkable persistence

### **Page's early life – the influence of family and community**

Page hailed from a large and supportive family that attached importance to civic engagement with its wider community. The Grafton of his birth was a rural town of about 2,250 inhabitants on the Clarence River. It was a service centre for local farming, increasingly dairy farms that emerged as the region's staple during the 1880s and 1890s.<sup>24</sup> Page was the fifth of the eleven children of Charles Page and Mary Johanna (Annie) Page, née Cox. He frequently reflected on the influence of family tradition, writing to his wife in 1924 of how "we are lucky to have forebears like this" and of "their fibre which is in us."<sup>25</sup>

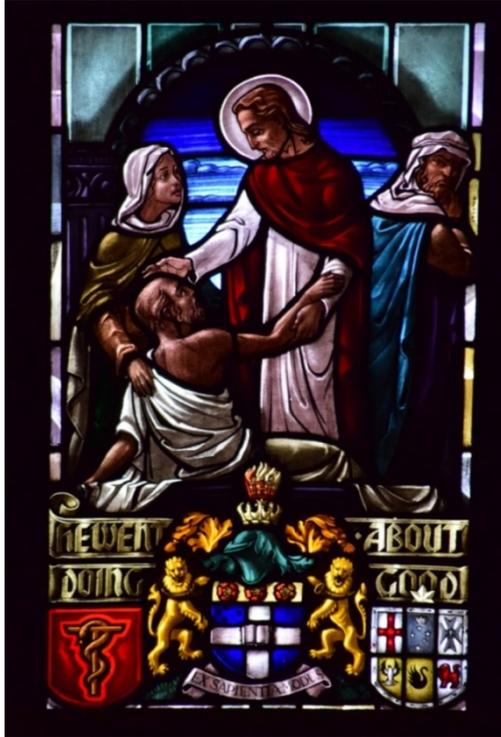
The family's sense of community service is enshrined in symbolism incorporated into the Page Memorial Window installed in 1957 at what is now Wesley and St Aidan's Uniting Church in Canberra. (The choice of Canberra over Grafton appears to signal a foremost commitment to the entire Australian nation). It depicts four scenes from the life of Christ, each marking a particular family member. The one for Earle shows Jesus healing the sick and includes the Rod of Asclepius, the classical symbol of medicine, and the coats of arms of the University of New England and of the Commonwealth of Australia. But the top panel dominates. This commemorates Earle's paternal grandfather

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<sup>24</sup> Terry Kass, *Grafton: Jacaranda City on the Clarence – A History*, Clarence Valley City Council, Grafton, 2009, p. 141.

<sup>25</sup> Earle Page to Ethel Page, 23 October 1924, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 9, folder 72.

James, the founder of the family in Australia and a powerful unseen influence on him.



*Figure 2: Earle Page panel, Page Memorial Window, Wesley and St Aidan's Uniting Church, Canberra.*

James Page had a strong Methodist background, having been Head Teacher at the Great Queen Street Wesleyan Day School in London for eleven years and then headmaster of Wesleyan Lambeth School. He was scientifically inquisitive, and undertook early studies in industrial chemistry. His work in education brought him into contact with Charles Darwin and T.H. Huxley. He was one of several teachers invited by the New South Wales government to implement its adoption of the Irish National System of education: as his oldest son suffered from tuberculosis, James gladly accepted. He arrived in Sydney in 1855 and soon shifted to Grafton to open the first National School – a multi-denominational primary school, which under James also offered adult evening classes – north of the Hunter.

James set an impressive precedent for involvement in civic causes. He became Grafton's first Town Clerk in 1860, was Secretary of the Grafton Schools Board from 1866, wrote newspaper leaders and served with other local bodies that included the area's first building societies, the Grafton Hospital and

the Grafton School of Arts. James maintained his commitment to Methodism by also serving as Treasurer and Senior Trustee of the local Wesleyan Church. He died in 1877, three years before the birth of Earle. Three of James's sons were mayors – Thomas in Grafton for several terms in the 1870s to 1890s, Robert in Casino, and Earle's father Charles in Grafton in 1908.<sup>26</sup>

Charles Page was born in 1851 and initially worked as an apprentice to a local blacksmith, coachmaker and engineer. He later took over the firm, expanding in the early twentieth century into car repair.<sup>27</sup> Annie was his employer's daughter, her family having moved from Melbourne to Grafton shortly after her birth in 1853. Her status as eldest child and thus as a co-carer limited her educational opportunities, but Earle recalled his mother compensating by being an avid reader determined to give her own children university educations. This played a crucial role in sparking the careers of Earle and several of his siblings.

When Charles and Annie married in 1870 they settled at Chatsworth Island, “a small and primitive downstream settlement on the Clarence” where they endeavoured to bring “the benefits of education and the comforts of religion” to fellow settlers.<sup>28</sup> This commitment continued after they returned to Grafton, including playing an important role in establishing a local secondary school. Charles and other members of the Page and Cox clans feature prominently in press reports as lay volunteers in the Grafton District Synod.<sup>29</sup>

For nearly 40 years Charles was superintendent of the Grafton Methodist Sunday School. On his death in March 1919, the local press reported that he and Annie's names were “known in every Methodist household in New South

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<sup>26</sup> This paragraph draws on Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-8, 28; Page family documents ‘James Page 1814-1877’, and ‘Charles Page 1851-1919 and Family’, provided by Helen Snyders; James Pages’ obituary in the *Grafton Argus* of 23 May 1877; and J.B. O’Hara, ‘A Doctor in the House: Earle Page 1915-1920’, *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal*, no. 14, April 1971, pp. 87-99.

<sup>27</sup> Kass, *op. cit.*, pp. 116, 155, 178.

<sup>28</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 20. The year of marriage is as advised by the Page family; Earle Page in *Truant Surgeon* gives the year variously as 1870 or 1871. NSW government records state 1871.

<sup>29</sup> See for example *The Methodist*, 5 December 1896, p. 4, and 8 December 1900, p. 12; and also the *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 20 March 1897, p. 5.

Wales.”<sup>30</sup> Family life provided young Earle with great personal security. He bore few lasting grudges, and as an adult looked back fondly on “a very happy boyhood and adolescence” amidst his “extraordinary clannish” family.<sup>31</sup>

Education owes more to family background than does any other aspect of Page’s vision for Australia. High family expectations and the presence of three older brothers set him examples to follow. His mother’s determination resulted in five of her children studying at Sydney University, a remarkable outcome for the time.<sup>32</sup> Page dwelt in his memoirs on the success of his siblings in professions that encompassed teaching, medicine, the public service, nursing and missionary work.<sup>33</sup> Brother Reg held high appointments with the New South Wales Department of Education. Another brother, Will, turned from teaching to become a pioneering psychiatrist working with returned soldiers. Two of his sisters, Edith and Ella, married teachers. The Page family was also strongly engaged with technology: as well as Earle’s maternal grandfather, his brothers Cyril and Maund were also engineers. Page’s generation continued the family’s involvement with local government, with two of his brothers serving as councillors.<sup>34</sup>

Earle’s older siblings were also his mentors. Page wrote of the particularly great influence of James, “a born teacher” whose mathematics coaching helped him jump two forms at school.<sup>35</sup> In March 1938, prior to heading to Britain for trade negotiations, Page wrote a touching farewell letter to the then seriously ill James assuring him that “giving bright boys their opportunity to reach the highest professional and commercial eminence” was “the divine

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<sup>30</sup> *Daily Examiner*, 19 March 1919, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Earle Page to James Page, 27 March 1938, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 3, folder 25.

<sup>32</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 20; and ‘Charles Page 1851-1919 and Family’, *op. cit.*

<sup>33</sup> Page, *ibid.*, pp. 19, 22-4.

<sup>34</sup> Sesquicentenary Anniversary Committee, *Grafton’s Sesquicentenary of Local Government 1859-2009: The First City on the North Coast*, Clarence Valley Council, Grafton, pp. 30-1;

Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 19, 22, 25.

<sup>35</sup> Page, *ibid.*, pp. 22.

afflatus". He attested to James's "good comradeship, advice and help" as having been vital to his own "early precocious scholastic development."<sup>36</sup>

Older sister Edith and her teacher husband crucially aided her siblings' studies by boarding them in Sydney.<sup>37</sup> In adult life, Page was especially attached to his brother Harold, eight years his junior. One other member of the Page clan recalled that "Earle thought more of Harold than himself."<sup>38</sup> Harold later joined the Commonwealth Public Service and then the New Guinea administration based at Rabaul. He rose to be deputy administrator, but died as a prisoner of the Japanese in 1942.

Page's awareness of "the search for knowledge and the extension of educational facilities...[as]...part of my family inheritance" featured prominently in his later writings. In his memoirs he described his appointment in 1955 as first Chancellor of the University of New England as placing "the coping-stone of tertiary education on the structure begun by my forebears."<sup>39</sup> Commitment to education and community service undoubtedly reflected his family's Methodism. Although Page's personal papers and public statements include only few references to religious belief, in 1902 he volunteered to become a Methodist medical missionary in the Solomon Islands before, at his wife's behest, deciding to continue as a doctor at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney. (Page's brother Rodger later won fame as a missionary and adviser to the royal family of Tonga.<sup>40</sup>)

Methodism in the nineteenth-century Anglosphere had a reputation not only for commitment to education and commerce, but also for challenging established

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<sup>36</sup> Earle Page to James Page, 27 March 1938, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 3, folder 25. James died late the next year.

<sup>37</sup> 'Charles Page 1851-1919 and Family', *op. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> Jim Page, *Great Uncle Harold: Harold Hillis Page 1888-1942*, privately published, no date, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>40</sup> Re Earle Page and the Solomon Islands; Carl Bridge, 'Page, Sir Earle Christmas (1880-1961)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/page-sir-earle-christmas-7941/text13821>; re Rodger Page; Carl Bridge, 'Page, Rodger Clarence George (1878-1965)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/page-rodger-clarence-george-7943/text13825>; both entries published first in hardcopy volume 11, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, 1988.

hierarchies. Australian accounts testify to the fervour of this “high-voltage religion” in the second half of the century, and the influence on colonial families of its work ethic and social conscience.<sup>41</sup> Political theorists such as John Gray have written of how Methodists and other dissenters encouraged Christian faith in earthly utopias and continuous progress, distinctly reminiscent of Page’s ambitions for worldly improvement.<sup>42</sup>



Figure 3: Charles and Annie Page with their family, c.1890; back row – Edith (Cissie) and James; middle row – Rodger, Charles, Annie, Maund, Earle; front row – Reginald, Harold, William, Ella. Cyril and Daphne were yet to be born. Note the evident damage to one of Annie’s eyes, treatment of which influenced Earle Page’s later decision to study medicine. Elder sister Edith supported him during his studies in Sydney. (Photo courtesy of the Page family).

<sup>41</sup> See for example Graeme Davison, *Lost Relations: Fortunes of my Family in Australia’s Golden Age*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2015, pp. 165-6, 180-2.

<sup>42</sup> John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, Penguin, London, 2008 (first published 2007), pp. 30-3; see also Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers: Religion and Politics in Europe from the Enlightenment to the Great War*, Harper Perennial, London, 2006 (first published 2005), pp. 123-4.

None of this should be taken to imply Page's family was especially wealthy. More impressive is its breadth of engagement with the Grafton community. In addition to serving in local government, Pages sat on the board of trustees of the public hospital, managed a canned meat works, ran a cinema, organised schools, and established a local newspaper.<sup>43</sup> His father included Earle and his siblings in an active social life, exposing them to an impressive array of future contacts. Political discussion was "the order of the day." Charles was a close friend of John See, later Premier of New South Wales 1901-04, who as member for Grafton took a strong interest in local development, especially transport infrastructure and utilising the Clarence.<sup>44</sup> Earle later recognised his remarkable family as a political asset. In his main campaign speech for this first run at parliament he spoke of how he had "at his disposal the knowledge gained by his family in three generations of public service on the river", especially his grandfather, father and uncle. This drew applause from his audience of Graftonians, who clearly knew the Page family well.<sup>45</sup>

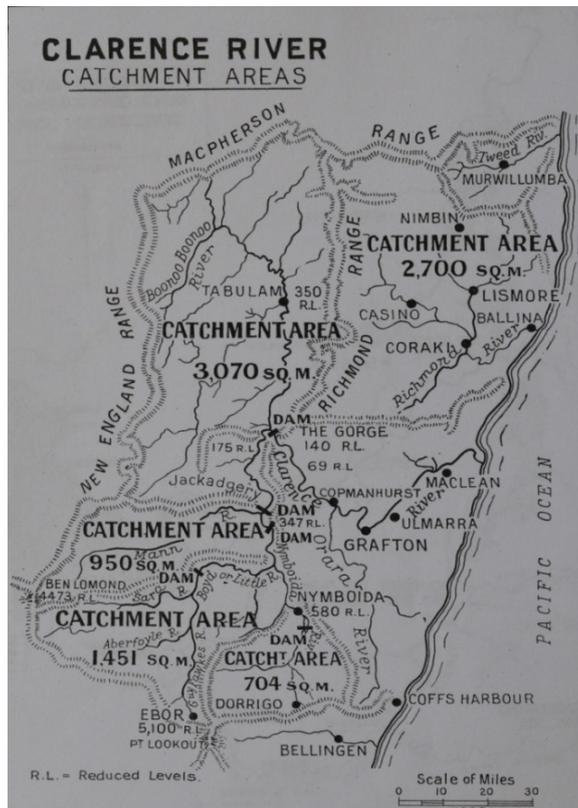


Figure 4: Page's Clarence Valley region as depicted in his 1944 booklet *Clarence River Hydro-Electric Gorge Scheme*, showing proposed dam sites.

<sup>43</sup> Kass, *op. cit.*, pp. 91, 115, 101, 194. Thomas Page and some of his brothers founded the *Grafton Argus*.

<sup>44</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, pp. 59, 445.

<sup>45</sup> *Daily Examiner*, 23 October 1919, p. 3.

Page's idealisation of the community in which he spent his childhood was his other great formative influence. This was powerful enough for him to give up a burgeoning medical career in the big city to return home. In his memoirs he proclaimed that "the main inspiration...of my political life, and indeed, the predominant influence throughout my eighty-one years has been the Clarence Valley where I was born."<sup>46</sup> An outside observer described the Grafton district at the start of the twentieth century in strikingly similar terms to Page's August 1917 speech – "one of the most fertile and interesting in the colony," with "marvellous and extensive resources." But the same observer added that the town was deprived of a proper water supply, a telephone service, railway links and even a bridge across the Clarence.<sup>47</sup>

Page particularly recalled Grafton's inclusiveness, "a small and friendly community lacking entirely in any sense of class or party" where "the broad Clarence...bound us in a fraternity."<sup>48</sup> Even in the midst of the 1890s depression "I have never in my recollection seen people so happy or so co-operative in realms of mutual help."<sup>49</sup> The "loyalty and understanding" of school chums provided "the continually renewed inspiration which enabled me to persevere in my quest for national balance and a place in the sun for the country dweller."<sup>50</sup> Page's commitment to the role of community overshadowed what little sense he displayed of socio-economic distinctions: to him, social division was more a matter of the spatial gap between town and country. There is some basis for these fond recollections, as Grafton indeed seems to have had a flatter social structure than many other country towns. Unlike Armidale in New England, also well known to Page, the Grafton hinterland was dominated by small selectors rather than large pastoralists.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>47</sup> *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 30 June 1900, pp. 30, 34. The author is described only as "Beri."

<sup>48</sup> EPP, folder 1855, pp. 5-6 of untitled draft for memoirs; Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 21, has a slightly different text.

<sup>49</sup> EPP, folder 1855, untitled draft for memoirs; Page, *ibid.*, p. 26 has a slightly different text.

<sup>50</sup> 'Chapter Two – Schools + Student Days', EPP, folder 1855, pp. 5-6; Page *Truant Surgeon*, p. 33, again provides a slightly different text.

<sup>51</sup> Kass, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

Page's commitment to his community included awareness of the potential of his beloved Clarence River, the basis of his great hopes for hydroelectricity. The Clarence is the focus of a watershed that is mainland Australia's second biggest river system south of the Tropic of Capricorn. (The Murray is larger). It is fed by high rainfall, and in Page's lifetime supported an unusually wide range of primary industries including beef, maize, dairy, sugar and subtropical fruits. But it is also prone to flooding. Page as a boy witnessed major floods in 1887 and 1890, later recalling the damage to local farming but also his excitement as rescue boats plied the flooded town.<sup>52</sup>

Family history and place of origin also nurtured Page's lifelong commitment to new states and regionalism. In a speech marking his retirement from the Menzies ministry in 1956, his listing of his lifetime goals began with "to subdivide the larger states of Australia in order to get government on the spot and to accelerate the development of our natural resources," and stressed that this idea had been firmly planted well before he ever entered parliament. He recalled not only the Grafton area's paucity of public amenities but also the artificiality of the New South Wales-Queensland border to the north. To Page, this "imaginary line" had "caused extraordinary discrimination", most obviously an 18 mile gap between state railway systems.<sup>53</sup> This implanted a lasting sense that existing state boundaries were too arbitrary to deserve reverence.

Agitation for equality in regional entitlement, the realignment of colonial and state boundaries, and the creation of new states were features of the Australian political landscape decades before the advent of Earle Page. Early in the development of the colonies there emerged perceptions that the uneven spread of population and production had fostered divergent interests and unfair imbalances in the distribution of political power. Three of the first separation movements were also the only successful ones, Van Diemen's Land in 1825, Victoria in 1851 and Queensland in 1859. Queensland was itself prone to unsuccessful moves to align political representation more closely with regional

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<sup>52</sup> 'A Man and his Valley – Prologue', document by Ulrich Ellis, 17 November 1952, EPP, folder 2369; also Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>53</sup> 'Australian Country Party Complimentary Dinner to Sir Earle Page', *op. cit.*

identities. Most of what became Queensland was included in the colony of North Australia created by the British Colonial Office in 1847 (but soon rescinded). During the 1850s there was an expectation amongst settlers in northern and central areas of the future Queensland that they would eventually have their own colonies, encouraged by the Presbyterian clergyman and indefatigable political activist, John Dunmore Lang. A Northern Separation League was active in Rockhampton in the 1860s.<sup>54</sup>

Further south, Lang also called for the separation of New South Wales between the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers as early as 1856 (at the same time coining the name Riverina for this area).<sup>55</sup> Other movements of varying degrees of longevity developed across the Australia of Page's youth as far away as the Western Australian goldfields and Albany. There were also early British proposals in the 1830s and 1840s for the creation of local governments in the Australian colonies that would have been significantly stronger than the local councils that eventually appeared.<sup>56</sup> These campaigns had limited success at the time, but were harbingers of the regionalism which Page zealously advocated.

It was the northern New South Wales movement that mattered most to Page. Its history stretched back intermittently to the 1840s. This was partly a matter of distance from Sydney, but also reflected the tendency for new statism to arise in areas sufficiently prosperous to spawn ambitions of fulfilling a greater potential. New England, adjacent to Page's coastal northeast, is widely seen as having had a particularly "strongly articulated perception of its 'difference'

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<sup>54</sup> R.S. Parker 'Why New States?', in R.S. Parker, J. Macdonald Holmes, J.P. Belshaw and H.V. Evatt, *New States for Australia*, Australian Institute of Political Science, Sydney, 1955, pp. 1-2. A fuller account of northern Queensland separatism during the nineteenth century is provided in G.C. Bolton, *A Thousand Miles Away: A History of North Queensland to 1920*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, second impression 1970 (first published 1963), pp. 12, 142-4, 181-6, and 205-9.

<sup>55</sup> Ulrich Ellis, *New Australian States*, The Endeavour Press, Sydney, 1933, pp. 71-2.

<sup>56</sup> A.J. Brown, 'Regional Governance and Regionalism in Australia', in Robyn Eversole and John Martin (eds.), *Participation and Governance in Regional Development: Global Trends in an Australian Context*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005, pp. 6-8.

and destiny.”<sup>57</sup> By the 1880s the Glen Innes Separation League alone reportedly had 1,400 members.<sup>58</sup>

Page was exposed to new statism from an early age. He frequently referred to it as being in his blood by virtue of campaigning by his grandfather James and two uncles. James variously agitated for the transfer of the Clarence Valley to Queensland or the creation of an entirely new colony, and once organised a petition to the British Parliament. In 1948 Earle proudly told a conference on new statism that as a Page he stood at the head of “almost a century of fighting for our political freedom through self-government and our economic freedom through the fullest provision of modern invention and amenities for the outback people.”<sup>59</sup> He remained impressed by his grandfather’s association with John Dunmore Lang, who had “thought all government from a distance was bad government.”<sup>60</sup> Page was particularly drawn to Lang’s belief that self-governing territories were sound building blocks for a federated nation-state encompassing the entire continent. Lang had told the people of Port Phillip District in 1841 that separation from New South Wales would match the subdivision of the United States into the small democratic states that had driven that nation’s development. There is evidence that early Australian colonial settlers expected that local separation would eventually lead to a federal nation and that such an outcome also influenced British policy towards the Australian colonies.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> J.S. Ryan, ‘Prelude – Uplands Always Attract’, in Alan Atkinson, J.S. Ryan, Iain Davidson and Andrew Piper (eds.), *High, Lean Country: Land, People and Memory in New England*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2006, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, p. 87. For an account of this and other early agitation see E.J. Tapp, ‘The Colonial Origins of the New England New State Movement’, *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 49, part 3, 1963, pp. 205-21.

<sup>59</sup> ‘History of Decentralisation: Speech by Sir Earle Page’, *Decentralisation and New State Movement, Armidale Convention, June 1948*, Armidale, 1948, pp. 25-6; also ‘Speech by the Rt. Hon. Sir Earle Page, MP at Annual Convention of New England New State Movement’, Grafton, 23 October 1961, New England New State Movement, UNE Archives, A0547, box 33.

<sup>60</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-9; D.W.A. Baker, ‘Lang, John Dunmore (1799–1878)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lang-john-dunmore-2326/text2953>; published first in hardcopy volume 2, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, 1967.

<sup>61</sup> A.J. Brown, ‘Constitutional Schizophrenia Then and Now: Exploring Federalist, Regionalist and Unitary Strands in the Australian Political Tradition’, a lecture in the Department of the Senate Occasional Lecture Series, 19 March 2004, especially pp. 41-9; also the same author’s ‘The Constitution We Were Meant to Have: Re-examining the Origins and Strength of Australia’s Unitary Political Traditions’, *Democratic Experiments*, Lectures in the Senate

Young Earle and his family would also have been very aware of the dominant local issue during his youth of incessant appealing for the Sydney-based state government to provide transformative large-scale public infrastructure – hydroengineering, railway links and harbour works – which spawned such protest groups as the Clarence Railway and Harbour League.<sup>62</sup> When he was just ten the *Clarence and Richmond Examiner* editorialised on “the feeling which widely prevails outside the Metropolitan area, that the interests of the country are made subservient to those of the great metropolis and its immediate surroundings.”<sup>63</sup>

The press of his youth was also full of reportage on the campaign to federate the colonies, especially the free trade versus protection debate.<sup>64</sup> (The state parliamentary seat of Grafton returned the Protectionist See from 1880 until 1904; the adjoining seat of Clarence returned the same Protectionist and later Liberal member for twenty-eight years from 1887, John McFarlane). The adult Page frequently quoted the foremost New South Wales federationist of these times, Henry Parkes, as linking new states to national prosperity.<sup>65</sup> The early drafters of the Australian Constitution readily accepted the need to provide for the creation of new states, albeit amidst debate on the precise mechanism for doing so. Queenslanders such as John Murtagh Macrossan and Samuel Griffith were particularly outspoken. These deliberations were an indicator of the strength of this concept in the politics of the day and of how the basic shape of the then putative Australian nation remained an open issue. This debate was to linger well into the twentieth century, generating the receptive audiences that encouraged the young Earle Page. The drafters of the Constitution eventually included section 124 on new states, based on a provision in the United States Constitution.<sup>66</sup> This enabled the Commonwealth to admit new

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Occasional Lecture Series 2004-2005, Papers on Parliament No. 44, January 2006, especially pp. 54-9.

<sup>62</sup> See for example *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 19 April 1890, p. 4, on a Grafton-Tweed railway, and a report in the same issue on a meeting of the Clarence Railway and Harbour League, p. 8.

<sup>63</sup> *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 22 April 1890, p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> See for example *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 29 April 1890, p. 2.

<sup>65</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>66</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-25 provides an account of various proposals for a mechanism for creating new states. Macrossan was parliamentary leader of the Queensland

states formed out of an existing state or states, but “only with the consent” of their parliaments.

### **Page’s early life: school, university and the wider times**

Page’s professional success and entry into public life were enabled by his formal education. He attributed his youthful determination to “become a doctor and give the country people a fair deal” to his mother losing an eye to a steel splinter, especially the experience of accompanying her on agonising, costly trips to distant Sydney for treatment.<sup>67</sup> At a very young age he became aware of a Faculty of Medicine at Sydney University in which a fellow townsman – Grafton Elliot Smith, later an eminent anatomist – had enrolled after winning the only scholarship for medicine then available, the Struth Exhibition. Page organised his studies over the next several years around an ambitious plan to secure this lucrative scholarship, awarded only at five yearly intervals on the basis of results in first-year Arts.<sup>68</sup>

The Struth, some lesser academic prizes and the proceeds of coaching other students were critically important as Page’s family had suffered major financial losses in the 1890s depression. As a boy visiting Sydney during the May 1893 bank smash he saw panicked cable car passengers offer to swap pound notes for nominally less valuable gold or silver coins, followed by the banks foreclosing on properties. Page recalled that he “knew my father would be ruined”.<sup>69</sup> He also wrote that this not only made him realise he would have to depend on his own resources to secure an education – significantly, he

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northern separation movement. Griffith was initially hostile to separation but as Premier proposed in 1892 to divide Queensland itself into a federal structure; see Bolton *op. cit.*, pp. 206-7

<sup>67</sup> ‘Australian Country Party Complimentary Dinner to Sir Earle Page’, and ‘Notes for Country Party Complimentary Dinner 22/6/56’, *op. cit.* A similar comment about his decision to study medicine is in *Truant Surgeon, ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>68</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon, ibid.*, p. 28. Completion of a year of Arts was then one of the standard means of entry into Medicine; see John Atherton Young, Ann Jervie Sefton and Nina Webb (eds.), *Centenary Book of the University of Sydney Faculty of Medicine*, Sydney University Press for the University of Sydney Faculty of Medicine, Sydney, 1984, p. 178.

<sup>69</sup> ‘Australian Country Party Complimentary Dinner to Sir Earle Page’, *op. cit.*

appreciated this even as a twelve year old – but also that it provided the basis of his commitment to establishing central banking.<sup>70</sup>

At the age of eleven Page won a bursary to Sydney Boys High School, flagship of the colony's public education system, but as his parents considered him too young to leave home instead began secondary studies at Grafton Public School. There he prospered under talented mathematics and languages masters, and built friendships with future local leaders such as Alf Pollack, later a Grafton solicitor and state member for Clarence. Page switched to Sydney Boys High for his final year of school. The school's then location in inner city Ultimo gave him his first taste of city living. (The school principal was a fellow Methodist, Joseph Coates, who Page made special mention of in his memoirs).<sup>71</sup> He studied simultaneously for honours in matriculation and the first year Sydney University Arts exam and, again with the support of gifted teachers, duly secured the Struth Exhibition. (As his family was unable to afford the fees required to sit for both the Senior Examination and the Matriculation Examination, he only formally passed the latter: Sydney University declined an offer of three tons of potatoes in lieu of the Senior Examination fee).<sup>72</sup> Page commenced classes at Sydney University medicine in early 1896 aged all of 15, an achievement he modestly recalled as the culmination of a "series of events which savoured to me of the miraculous" but which actually reflected unusually youthful determination and intelligence.<sup>73</sup>

Page described his first years as a medical student as "inspiring, absorbing and happy."<sup>74</sup> This owed much to the 1890s being a decade of great advances in medicine, including discovery of the microbial causes of such diseases as tuberculosis and plague, new surgical methods for compound fractures, X-rays and advances in aseptic surgery that expanded scope for abdominal operations

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<sup>70</sup> Page, *ibid.*, p. 26. Page added in his memoirs other factors in the development of his interest in central banking, such as the difficulties the early Commonwealth Bank had in coping with shortages of foreign exchange and a 1921 international monetary conference at Genoa; see *ibid.*, pp. 138-143.

<sup>71</sup> Arch Ferguson (ed.), *High: The Centenary History of Sydney High School*, Child & Henry, Brookvale, 1983, pp. 7-8; Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 29, 32.

<sup>72</sup> Page, *ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

(later a Page speciality).<sup>75</sup> He wrote in his memoirs of how new treatments “exposed former ignorance and current prejudice” that had to be overcome “before the fruits of the medical and technical revolution could be obtained.”<sup>76</sup> This was an early manifestation of Page’s lifelong self-image as a courageous innovator battling forces of reaction. Page the student was also excited by Federation-era political debate. He was impressed by such members of the University Senate as Edmund Barton and Andrew Garran (father of Robert), and by the University Chancellor Normand MacLaurin (also a doctor, and a Federation opponent). Page participated in the Federation debates “to some extent myself”, probably his first political engagement.<sup>77</sup>

Page’s final year of study was his most difficult. Despite being yet to graduate, he was appointed Superintendent of the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children for a month to cover for absent medical residents, a tribute to his burgeoning professional reputation.<sup>78</sup> He was 21 when he received his degree in 1902, equal top of his class of 18 fellow students (albeit in a year when no firsts were awarded). Page attached significance to the fact that the two other honours students that year were also from the north coast.<sup>79</sup> The eminent surgeon Alexander MacCormick offered him a position as his house surgeon at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.<sup>80</sup> Glowing references from professional colleagues confirm that he was a fine young surgeon indeed. Dr Joseph Foreman, lecturer in gynaecology, later described Page as “one of the best men the Sydney University has turned out – an exceptionally good surgeon and sound practitioner.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Carl Bridge, ‘Earle Page: The Politician and the Man’, first lecture in the Earle Page College Thirtieth Anniversary Series, 9 March 1993, p. 2.

<sup>76</sup> Such as the all-too typical reluctance of “the older professional men” to accept that antiphtheritic vaccine could save thousands of children; see Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>79</sup> *Calendar of the University of Sydney for the Year 1902*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1902, p. 228; and *ibid.*, p. 40. Sydney University also bestowed on Page an honorary Doctor of Science degree in 1952.

<sup>80</sup> Bridge, *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry on Earle Page, *op. cit.*

<sup>81</sup> Reference by Dr Joseph Foreman, 3 September 1915, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 11, folder 87.

Page did not directly write about the sense of city life he gained as a young surgeon, but his lasting sense of its failings suggests the impression was decidedly negative. He often expressed this using medical analogies and warnings. As a first term parliamentarian he said that “when a city becomes over a certain size it loses its manufacturing value, because workmen have to travel too far to work, and departs from its proper functions, involving degeneration and ill-health of its population.”<sup>82</sup> Despite later maintaining residences at suburban Woollahra and Elizabeth Bay, Page’s disdain for big cities never waned. Medical metaphors were to enliven numerous other Page pronouncements, such as likening a parliamentary attack by Billy Hughes to “the bursting of a long accumulating abscess of jaundice, spite and venom, with all the after effects of poison, that had turned into a running sore.”<sup>83</sup>

The influence on Page of the wider context of his youth is harder to chart. Historians have written of the social optimism of late colonial Australia. Helen Irving calls the late 1880s and early 1890s a time of confidence in utopias of reason, “where the destructive habits of human society are corrected by good design and clear thinking.”<sup>84</sup> Stuart Macintyre comments similarly on the sense of an “absence of history and a corresponding freedom to invent the future.”<sup>85</sup> There is also abundant contemporary evidence of optimistic developmentalist aspirations pervading Page’s early years. The journalist and historian A.W. Jose in the 1909 edition of his widely read *History of Australasia* called on the nation to “take seriously in hand the developing of the country’s natural resources”, for which “young Australians cannot serve their country better than by preparing themselves with zealous study to take their share in the task directly they become men.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 7 April 1921, p. 7282.

<sup>83</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 215. Hughes responded to this personal attack of March 1929 by asking Page for a truce.

<sup>84</sup> Helen Irving, *To Constitute a Nation: A Cultural History of Australia’s Constitution*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp. 38, 44.

<sup>85</sup> Stuart Macintyre, *A Colonial Liberalism: The Lost World of Three Victorian Visionaries*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 1991, p. 12.

<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Horne, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

Did such utopian and developmentalist thought percolate through to provincial Grafton to be imbibed by the young Earle Page? Or was it absorbed when he was studying in Sydney? Some certainly reached Grafton, for his family remained very aware of its legacy of contact with that aforementioned great optimist, J.D. Lang. Although Page was widely read, his writings and speeches do not appear to mention utopian or likeminded writers active during his formative years. Page instead acknowledged his early attraction to ideas of an Imperial Federation. In London in 1942 he told Lionel Curtis, leading theorist of Empire federalism and of world government, that his writings had drawn him into politics twenty-five years earlier.<sup>87</sup> (Page gave differing accounts of what had most motivated him to enter public life).

Less abstract forces transforming rural Australia during Page's youth might have contributed more significantly to his political formation. Highly visible changes in household technology and consumer goods probably encouraged his faith in change and progress.<sup>88</sup> Perhaps their visibility also added to rural fears that industrial manufacturing was surpassing agriculture and that the benefits of new technology were not being equally shared out by the big cities. These contributed to a late nineteenth-century rural culture seen by B.D. Graham as characterised by anti-urbanism, alienation and loss of status. This stress was most obviously reflected in population and economic drift to the cities. The percentage of the national population living in metropolitan areas rose steadily from 32 per cent in 1881 to just over 38 per cent in 1911: that of primary industry workers out of total breadwinners plummeted from 44 per cent in 1871 to just 26 per cent in 1921.<sup>89</sup>

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also saw a rapid rise of small-scale wheat and dairy farming in regions such as the Mallee, the Riverina and

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<sup>87</sup> Page's wartime diary, entry for 15 January 1942, EPP, folder 2787 (iii). Page wrote here of *The Empire on the Anvil* as being by Curtis, but it is actually by W. Basil Worsfold; he may have meant Curtis's 1916 *The Problem of the Commonwealth*.

<sup>88</sup> Geoffrey Blainey lists the innovations that spread through colonial Australia during the second half of the nineteenth century as including kerosene light, electricity, cars, bicycles, tap water, telegrams, new ways of weighing and packaging, paper money, matches and much else; see Geoffrey Blainey, *Black Kettle and Full Moon: Daily Life in a Vanished Australia*, Penguin, Camberwell, 2003, pp. 424-5.

<sup>89</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

Page's north-eastern New South Wales, aided by William Farrer's new wheat cultivars.<sup>90</sup> Simultaneously, the Federation Drought and a dwindling supply of new viable land constrained population growth and production across rural Australia.<sup>91</sup> Aitkin links the rise of rural political activity to a growing shortage of unoccupied land, the impact of railways on small town industry and the increasing difficulty of dividing farms so as to keep children on the land. The protectionism and industrial arbitration central to what became known as the Australian Settlement of the early Federation era seemed deliberately designed to favour the cities over the country. But railways and the telegraph also connected rural communities and helped spread awareness of their common interests.<sup>92</sup> Faith in farming as the backbone of the nation remained strong, and new regional and sectoral associations aided the formation of political country parties during the early twentieth century.<sup>93</sup> Graeme Davison and Marc Brodie, while noting an overall pattern of rural decline during the twentieth century, observe that there were variations between regions and periods, sufficient to keep rural hopes and dreams alive.<sup>94</sup>

These rural anxieties and reactions were so pervasive they must surely have made an impression on an alert young man like Earle Page. In his memoirs he wrote of how the recovery of the Clarence Valley from flood, drought and the financial insolvency of the 1890s was frustrated by decade-long low prices for farm products. He recalled farmers already struggling to meet transport and handling costs sometimes being required to pay for the dumping of unsalable produce at sea, and that "practically everyone on the northern rivers lived more or less within a barter economy."<sup>95</sup> Such bitter reflections raise the question of the extent to which his views were a manifestation of the 'countrymindedness' that arose during this time of rural hardship. "Countrymindedness", says Aitkin, is "physiocratic, populist and decentralist." It holds that rural traits such as

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<sup>90</sup> Moore in Walter, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-5.

<sup>91</sup> W.A. Sinclair, *The Process of Economic Development in Australia*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1976, pp. 175-6, 181.

<sup>92</sup> Don Aitkin, 'Countrymindedness – The Spread of an Idea', in S.L. Goldberg and F.B. Smith (eds.), *Australian Cultural History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, pp. 52-4.

<sup>93</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 38-54.

<sup>94</sup> Graeme Davison and Marc Brodie (eds.), *Struggle Country: The Rural Ideal in Twentieth Century Australia*, Monash University ePress, Clayton, 2005, p. xii.

<sup>95</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

community co-operation bring out the best in individuals, and that country life is the ennobling basis of the national economy. By contrast, urban life is parasitical and corrupt. But as power resides in the cities, there is a need for a political party for country people “to articulate the true voice of the nation.”<sup>96</sup>

Countrymindedness added a strident discordant note to the Australian Settlement by stressing the exclusion of an entire sector of the nation.<sup>97</sup> It was also a highly flexible predisposition that ranged from agrarian romanticism to progressive social and economic ideas such as decentralisation, and from praising farmers to casting the denizens of small towns as upholders of rural values.<sup>98</sup> Countrymindedness overlapped with many of Page’s early ideas. He agreed that the nation depended on primary producers, that rural pursuits brought out the best in people (though he would have stressed small communities more than farming) and that decentralisation was vital. But Page went well beyond the defensiveness of countrymindedness to embrace assertive developmentalism for the entire nation. He did not advocate such strands of agrarian romanticism as common ownership of land, the adulation of nature or the perceived virtues of the peasant lifestyle.<sup>99</sup> (Page had seen enough of rural isolation to be more interested in alleviating poverty). He was excited by the opportunities that modernity presented rural Australia and the wider nation, such as electrification. Conventional countrymindedness thus provided only a partial foundation for his wider beliefs. Page bridged countrymindedness and developmentalism, with development his priority.

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<sup>96</sup> Aitkin, ‘Countrymindedness – The Spread of an Idea’, *op. cit.*, pp. 51, 52. Aitkin postulates that Page might have originated countrymindedness as a term – but I have seen no references that establish coinage by this man who tended to repeat favoured words and phrases over decades. The term dates back to at least the early 1930s, although it was often used in the narrow sense of sympathy for rural causes; see for example the *Lithgow Mercury*, 20 June 1930, p. 4.

<sup>97</sup> Stokes sees the state ensuring that all citizens had the opportunity to fulfil their potential as an important aspect of “state developmentalism”; see Stokes, ‘The ‘Australian Settlement’ and Australian Political Thought’, *op. cit.*, pp. 13, 15.

<sup>98</sup> Marc Brodie, ‘The Politics of Rural Nostalgia Between the Wars’, in Davison and Brodie, *op. cit.*, p. 9.10.

<sup>99</sup> The rich historical literature on agrarianism is summarized in James A. Montmarquet’s *The Idea of Agrarianism: From Hunter-Gatherer to Agricultural Radical in Western Culture*, University of Idaho Press, Moscow, 1989.

Page feasibly also derived inspiration from American agrarian thought. Debate in late nineteenth-century Australia about rural education was heavily influenced by accounts of agricultural colleges in the United States.<sup>100</sup> Page's longstanding interest in American development led to his undertaking a wartime trip there in 1917. The most prominent American rural improvers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the famed Country Life Movement of scholars and journalists. This was led by the Cornell professor Liberty Hyde Bailey, who advocated environmental conservation, rural education, new technology (including electrification) and decentralisation. Although this movement had a largely intellectual base, there was a commonality of context with more populist Australian concerns about rural decline. Like Page, Bailey thought that urbanisation sapped naturalness and spontaneity, and so advocated improving the appeal of rural life such as by drawing the educated to the countryside.<sup>101</sup> John Wesley Powell, another outspoken American, proposed the regional control of watersheds.<sup>102</sup> Although there appears to be no direct evidence of Page avowedly emulating Bailey or Powell, his travels and reading on the United States (such as the writings of James Bryce, a famed British interpreter of the US) most likely exposed him to their thoughts and reinforced his own ideas.<sup>103</sup>

### **Page returns to Grafton: new formative experiences**

Page's early experiences as a medical professional powerfully reinforced and refined his ideas about rural development. In 1903 he returned to Grafton to recuperate from a near-fatal infection contracted while conducting a post-mortem. He later reflected that this experience left him with a fatalism that

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<sup>100</sup> Greg Logan, 'An Urban Revolution for Rural Australia: The Genesis of Agricultural Colleges in Colonial Australia', in R.C. Petersen and G.W. Rodwell (eds.), *Notes from Essays in the History of Rural Education in Australia and New Zealand*, William Michael Press, Casuarina, pp. 203-4.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 232-5; also G.W. Rodwell, 'The Country Life Movement and Educational Reform in the United States', in Petersen and Rodwell, *ibid.*, pp. 9-10; and William L. Bowers, *The Country Life Movement in America, 1900-1920*, Kennikat Press, Port Washington, 1974, pp. 7-14, 30-1.

<sup>102</sup> Donald Worster, 'Watershed Democracy: Recovering the Lost Vision of John Wesley Powell' in Marnie Leybourne and Andrea Gaynor (eds.), *Water: Histories, Cultures, Ecologies*, University of Western Australia Press, Crawley, 2006, pp. 3-14.

<sup>103</sup> Page for example quoted Bryce at length in an article in the *Daily Examiner*, 16 February 1918, pp. 3-4.

removed his fear of death but also made him determined to use each day to the full.<sup>104</sup> Page elected to stay on by joining a local medical practice as junior partner to another GP. By September 1904 he had raised enough capital to open his own small private hospital, Clarence House, in neighbouring South Grafton. This was a somewhat marginalised community of about thirteen hundred inhabitants on the southern side of the Clarence that was pointedly isolated by the lack of a bridge across the river. Page recalled in his memoirs how he was motivated by the need to extend modern medicine across the Clarence Valley region, describing this as an idea he had harboured since his student days.<sup>105</sup> Working as a rural doctor added a sharp edge to his appreciation of the city-country contrast:

A patient 70 or 80 miles away in the bush who was seriously ill had very little chance of recovery. It took 12 to 15 hours to ride for a Doctor and it took 12 to 15 hours for the Doctor to ride back – more often than not only to find that his patient had died hours before his arrival.<sup>106</sup>

Page added that the deciding factor in his decision to stay was the need to overcome local hostility to new medical practices. Local doctors denied him use of the Grafton Hospital (where he was on the Honorary Staff) to conduct a radical hysterectomy using the latest techniques. So Page instead proceeded to do so before their very eyes using a makeshift operating room in his mother's house "as a contribution to their education."<sup>107</sup> He wrote with equal satisfaction of inviting members of the Hospital Board to inspect Clarence House, with the result that they installed "similar indispensable facilities."<sup>108</sup> Such triumphs consolidated his self-image as a visionary pitted against reaction, but who ultimately had history on his side. Open contempt for the more blinkered elements of his profession was carried over into his political career as a persistent disdain for sceptics of his plans to shape the nation. The intensity of young Dr Page led him into some righteous exchanges. In

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<sup>104</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43-4.

<sup>106</sup> 'Speech by Hon Earle Page MP, Acting Prime Minister, Motor Trades Show Sydney, 14-1-27' EPP, folder 1784.

<sup>107</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, p. 44; for his membership of Grafton Hospital's Honorary Staff see Kay Paine, *History of Grafton Hospital*, Clarence River Historical Society, Grafton, 2015 (first published 2005), p. 71.

<sup>108</sup> Page, *ibid.*, p. 46.

November 1905 he publicised a dispute over the resignation of medical officers of a local friendly society by placing a long, angry letter in the press that rambled through the minutiae of the case.<sup>109</sup>

Page's outwardly rationalist, almost deterministic approach to public policy and technology owes much to his early successes in introducing innovations into his small town practice. His X-ray machine was the first in New South Wales outside Sydney, but had to be modified to use bichromate batteries as the Grafton region still lacked an electricity supply.<sup>110</sup> He acquired what was said to be the first car on the north coast of New South Wales, which his brother Maund converted to a prototype ambulance, and also installed a hospital telephone. Both were important acquisitions for a rural practice that stretched one hundred miles along the coast and fifty miles inland.<sup>111</sup> His hospital's pressing need for reliable electric light helped convince him of the importance of electrification:

The problem of securing good lights in our modern hospital to permit surgery to be performed at all hours of the day and night ultimately led me to one of my life's objectives. This was to make electricity available in ample quantities at a uniform price in country and city alike and especially to secure the harnessing of all our latent water power and the conservation of all our waters.<sup>112</sup>

This was innovative thinking for the time – electricity was first used in the Royal Prince Alfred only in 1912 and gas still predominated even in the big cities.<sup>113</sup> Page was to retain a ready faith in the ability of technology to catalyse regional equality and liberate the individual.

In September 1906 Page married Ethel Blunt, whom he had met when she was a senior staff nurse at the Royal Prince Alfred. He recalled first encountering

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<sup>109</sup> *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 4 November 1905, p. 12.

<sup>110</sup> Sally Collier, 'Sir Earle Christmas Grafton Page: A Doctor for the Nation', BA (Hons.) thesis, Department of History, University of New England, June 1994, pp. 9-10.

<sup>111</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 321. Helen Snyders provided the detail concerning the ambulance.

<sup>112</sup> Untitled draft for Page's memoirs, EPP, folder 1855.

<sup>113</sup> Muriel Knox Doherty, *The Life and Times of Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Sydney, Australia*, New South Wales College of Nursing, Sydney, 1996, p. 302.

her decidedly abruptly by accidentally setting her dress afire during a medical procedure. Perhaps Page was also attracted by Ethel's having topped her training year, and later persuaded her to join Clarence House.<sup>114</sup> They had five children. Although there is little indication that Ethel played a direct role in forming his policy ideas, their private correspondence affirms his description of her as his foremost political and personal confidant, who supported the family and his medical practice during Page's frequent absences.<sup>115</sup> (The next closest was David Drummond, with whom Page shared northern New South Wales and Methodist origins). Ethel joined him in public campaigning and was described by her husband as the better public speaker of the two (quite plausibly, given testimony by Ellis and audio recordings which suggest that Earle was only a competent orator). She was a founder of the Women's Country Party, and served with the Australian Red Cross Society, the Country Women's Association and the National Council of Women.

Over many years Page sent Ethel a stream of affectionate and discursive letters, frequently writing of private goals and stresses. These include evidence that her advice was crucial in Page's decision not to become a missionary and instead devote himself to more earthly pursuits. In May 1906 he wrote that she had helped in "bringing back to me, altered and changed beyond recognition my loftier ambitions and desires; different they are from the old ones of four years ago; with more thought of my work in this life and my beneficial influence on men's welfare here than on my own salvation and other men's salvation hereafter."<sup>116</sup> Soon after, he assured Ethel that he would "long for your sympathy and communion and counsel at every critical time of my life."<sup>117</sup> Ethel maintained a discernably separate persona from that of her husband. She often spoke in public on women's participation in politics, in which her husband showed limited interest. After a 1925 trip to the United States and

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<sup>114</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-6.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>116</sup> Page to Ethel Page, 5 May 1906, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 11, folder 90. "Four years ago" is when Page had just finished his medical studies and was setting out on a professional career.

<sup>117</sup> Page to Ethel Page, 17 June 1906, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 11, folder 90.

Europe, she observed that Australian women “do not seem to be alive to the necessity of organisation and the benefit of the effect in political life.”<sup>118</sup>

Following his marriage, Page began to display a distinct business bent that he retained for the rest of his life. In 1908 he invested £2,100 in land for dairy farms and a sawmill in southern Queensland near Kandanga, “a property that is sure to grow in value and more than double in a few years”, he told Ethel.<sup>119</sup> By 1912 his combined assets stood at £10,000.<sup>120</sup> Page was to develop a wide portfolio of interests in farming, timber, the share market and newspapers, as well as a faith in the potency of the private sector. In policy pronouncements he invariably portrayed private investment in development projects as inherently preferable to public money that was subject to the whims of politics.

### **Page’s first policy campaigns: hydroelectricity and new states**

In November 1952 Ulrich Ellis presented Page with a draft prologue for a projected book on water resources. Even allowing for the drafter’s propensity for overwriting, this testifies to the early influence of the Clarence on Page. Ellis wrote of Page that “the dull roar of the flooded stream has always stirred his blood” and so he had “set himself the task of achieving the marriage of electrical power and water as a prime factor for the advancement of the Valley.”<sup>121</sup>

Although Page did not originate the idea of damming the Clarence, he was primarily responsible for nurturing the idea. Page became convinced early in his adult life that the Clarence presented immense potential for hydroelectricity. It appeared to have the necessary ingredients of reliable water supply, a vertical water flow over distance and potential dam sites. Page was particularly interested in a ten kilometre segment known as The Gorge. This sits about 160 kilometres inland near where four of the river’s main tributaries unite and pass

<sup>118</sup> *Sunday Times*, Sydney, 9 August 1925, Social and Magazine Section, p. 5.

<sup>119</sup> Page to Ethel Page, 25 November 1909, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 7, folder 71.

<sup>120</sup> Bridge, *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry on Earle Page, *op. cit.*

<sup>121</sup> ‘A Man and his Valley – Prologue’, *ibid.*

through a deep rocky gap bounded by mountains, providing a possible basis for a dam.<sup>122</sup>

Page grew up in an era of much-publicised progress globally in the generation of electricity that made hydroelectricity commercially practical. This raised hopes for its socially transformative powers, including easing rural poverty. A new electrical generator, the dynamo, was developed in the 1870s to produce continuous electrical current in commercial quantities. From 1891, the use of alternating current in the transmission of electricity from the point of generation to that of consumption mitigated hydroelectricity's drawback of usually being generated in locations remote from end users. Dynamite and new air rock drills reduced the cost of building hydroelectric power stations, and there were also improvements in turbines and penstocks (used to channel water to turbines).<sup>123</sup> The internationally publicised use of the first large hydroelectricity turbines in 1895 by the Niagara Falls Power Company is generally taken to mark the start of modern commercial hydroelectricity.<sup>124</sup>

Faith in electricity spread worldwide. In the United States, it was “invoked as the panacea for every social ill”, that “promised to lighten the toil of workers and housewives, to provide faster and cleaner forms of transport, and to revolutionise the farm.”<sup>125</sup> Early Australian advocates of hydroelectricity, such as the metallurgist James Gillies who proposed its application to zinc refining,

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<sup>122</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, p. 57.

<sup>123</sup> Alternating current involves transmitting electricity at high voltage from the point of generation to near the place of consumption, then using a transformer to reduce the voltage to a level safe for usage. For new hydroelectric technology, see John H. Dales, *Hydroelectricity and Industrial Development: Quebec 1898-1940*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1957, pp. 13-5; David S. Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change And Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1969, pp. 285-6; K.M. Dallas, *Water Power: Past and Future*, privately published, Hobart, 1970, pp. 213, 281, 288-9; and David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape and the Making of Modern Germany*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2006, pp. 207-8.

<sup>124</sup> Thomas P. Hughes states that hydroelectricity was also pioneered in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California and the Appalachians in the US south-east; see *Networks of Power – Electrification in Western Society 1880-1930*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1983, pp. 264-6.

<sup>125</sup> David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994, p. 143.

were conscious of greater progress overseas.<sup>126</sup> Page was probably aware of early hydroelectric facilities established in northern New South Wales, at Tamworth in 1888, the Gara River near Armidale in 1895 and at the Styx River in 1906.<sup>127</sup> But when he began campaigning for hydroelectricity in the early 1910s the only large-scale Australian facility was a private generator installed at the Mt Lyell copper mine in Tasmania in 1911.<sup>128</sup> Power generation and supply in Australia remained in the hands of private companies and local councils.<sup>129</sup> Cultural images of technological modernity that appealed to Page's penchant for transformative technologies featured in the Grafton press of his early adulthood, from a report on how the new apparatus of the transformer could render powerful currents "harmless and agreeable," to an account of steps towards installing electric street lighting, a sure sign that "Grafton is on the move of progress."<sup>130</sup>

Page was particularly aware of historical proposals to harness the Clarence system. Early suggestions focused on port operations and flood control, but in 1908 the system's impressively reliable flow attracted mainland Australia's first major hydroelectricity proposal.<sup>131</sup> William Corin, Chief Electrical Engineer in

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<sup>126</sup> Roger Lupton, *Lifeblood: Tasmania's Hydro-Power*, Focus Publishing, Edgecliff, 2000 (likely year of publication, not given in book itself), p. 23.

<sup>127</sup> Denis Gojak, 'Gara River: An Early Hydro-Electric Scheme in Northern New South Wales', *Australian Journal of Historical Archaeology*, vol. 6, 1988, pp. 3-4.

<sup>128</sup> Sources on early Australian hydroelectricity are Lionel Wigmore, *Struggle for the Snowy: The Background of the Snowy Mountains Scheme*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1968, p. 66; Alan Crawford, *Electric Power*, Nelson Doubleday, Lane Cove, 1968, p. 50; Alan Crawford, 'Hydro-Electric Development', *The Australian Encyclopaedia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, volume five, second edition, 1958, p. 43; Geoffrey Blainey, *The Peaks of Lyell*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, third edition, 1967 (first published 1954), pp. 231-3. Other early Australian installations included those at the Mt Bischoff mine in Tasmania (1884), the Jenolan Caves, Launceston (1888 and 1895), and at the south-western Queensland township of Thargomindah (1893).

<sup>129</sup> Robert R. Booth, *Warring Tribes: The Story of Power Development in Australia*, revised edition 2003 (first published 2000), pp. 10-4; and Guy Allbut, *A Brief History of Some of the Features of Public Electricity Supply in Australia: And the Formation and Development of the Electricity Supply Association of Australia, 1918-1957*, Electricity Supply Association of Australia, Melbourne, 1958.

<sup>130</sup> *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 25 August 1903, p. 2, and 11 December 1913, p. 4.

<sup>131</sup> In 1887-88 the engineer Sir John Coode submitted a report to the New South Wales government on unblocking the mouth of the Clarence, and in 1894 J.W. Archibald and D.W. Campbell proposed a dam at The Gorge for flood prevention. See D.R. Crawford, 'Sir John Coode (1816-1892)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/coode-sir-john-3250/text4915>, published first in hardcopy Melbourne University Press, Carlton, volume 3, 1969; Page, *Truant Surgeon*, op. cit., p. 444; and Earle Page, *Unique Opportunity for Co-ordinated National Development Based on*

the New South Wales Public Works Department, put to local councils a joint water supply and power scheme based on the Nymboida River, which flows into the Mann River which in turn merges with the Clarence. Only the water supply component was taken up at the time.<sup>132</sup> Family tradition again contributed: Page recalled that his father as mayor of Grafton in 1908 was “the driving force” in providing the town with a permanent water supply from the Nymboida.<sup>133</sup> The Nymboida was later the focus of Page’s hydroelectric campaigning. Corin was to become hydroelectricity’s most prominent supporter within the engineering profession and a pioneering proponent of a national electricity grid.<sup>134</sup>

Page was sufficiently cognisant of international developments to use his first overseas trip, to attend the 1910 Australasian Medical Conference in New Zealand, as an opportunity to “visit and study new water-power developments...especially their progressive improvements in extending electricity to country homes and farms in the vicinity of the projects.” This “stimulated my ambition to secure the installation of similar schemes in Australia, especially on the Clarence.”<sup>135</sup> It also marked the start of a lifelong penchant for seeking out overseas exemplars for his policy ideas.

His medical practice well established, Page from about 1910 become increasingly involved in local civic movements and politics. He later credited a local mining engineer and surveyor called W.J. Mulligan with first proposing to dam the Clarence River itself for power, in 1913. Page took the idea up as combining his attraction to regionalism and new technology, and claimed that it

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*Proposals for the Clarence*, no place of publication, but internal evidence suggests Grafton c. 1956, EPP, folder 1803.

<sup>132</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>134</sup> He also produced a detailed proposal for a Snowy hydroelectric scheme as early as 1920; see K.R. Shedden, *Pioneering Hydro-electric Development in Australia: Notes on the Life and Work of William Corin*, Taree, c. 1963, pp.1, 3. Shedden was Corin’s daughter. The first proposals to harness the hydroelectric potential of the Snowy date from 1903-4 and arose from the work of T. Pridham and Charles Scrivener on the planned new federal capital; see D.J. Hardman, ‘The Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority: Origins and Antecedents’, *Public Administration*, vol. 27, no. 3, September 1968, pp. 209-10.

<sup>135</sup> Untitled draft text on Page’s early medical career prepared for his memoirs, EPP, folder 1855; see also similar published text at Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 58, from which the latter quote comes.

led to his being “induced to enter the local municipal council to sponsor the project.”<sup>136</sup> His first experience of public office came that same year when he was elected to South Grafton Council.<sup>137</sup> Alderman Page made a name for himself by extolling ambitious civic improvements, ranging from conventional schemes for a secure town water supply and public electric lighting, to the more transformative damming of the Clarence.<sup>138</sup> Page in 1913 also made early forays into parliamentary politics by chairing campaign meetings for the local candidate for state parliament endorsed by the New South Wales Farmers and Settlers’ Association (FSA), the state’s main representative body for primary producers.<sup>139</sup>

In 1914 Page invited Corin to his home and accompanied him to The Gorge, accessible only on horseback. The following year Corin produced the first fully professional study of a dam at that location. This proposed a two mile tunnel to supply a power station sited below The Gorge, but the idea was promptly pigeonholed for the duration of the First World War.<sup>140</sup> Corin lacked Page’s propensity for attracting the public and political eye. Alderman Page wrote articles in the *Grafton Argus* in August-September 1914 – not a good time to be trying to capture the public imagination – and included Mulligan in a delegation seeking the Labor state Minister of Works’ agreement to have the area properly surveyed.<sup>141</sup> When the engineer H.G. Carter assessed the Clarence in 1929 he credited Page, not Corin, as having first “so ably sponsored” the hydroelectric harnessing of the Clarence to the wider public.<sup>142</sup> Corin, undeterred, in December 1918 was to produce a more ambitious proposal

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<sup>136</sup> Draft for *Truant Surgeon*, EPP, folder 1855; see also Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>137</sup> Grafton Council was created in 1859, but South Grafton split off in 1896. The two were re-united in 1957 and incorporated into Clarence Valley Council in 2004.

<sup>138</sup> See for example the later report in the *Daily Examiner* of 14 February 1918 praising Page’s successes in securing electric lighting, p. 4.

<sup>139</sup> J.B. O’Hara, *The Entry into Public Life of Sir Earle Christmas Grafton Page (1915-1921)*, BA (Hons.) thesis, University of New England, 1969, p. 6.

<sup>140</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 58, 444; Ulrich Ellis ‘The Story of Nymboida, notes for Sir Earle Page’, 12 December 1952, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 3, folder 34.

<sup>141</sup> Page, *ibid.*, p. 444; Ellis, *ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> H.G. Carter, ‘Report on the Hydro-Electric Development of the Clarence-Mitchell Rivers’, 8 March 1929, EPP, folder 1046.

involving four distinct stages of construction, beginning with damming the Nymboida and culminating in a 200 foot high dam at The Gorge.<sup>143</sup>

Page's early campaigning to dam the Clarence, however heartfelt, gave him only a certain amount of publicity and little tangible success. It was the new state movement that contributed most to building his local profile and provided a solid base for his entry into politics. His early engagement with new statism is important context for later discussion of the rise of Page and of his lasting commitment to decentralisation and regionalisation.

Nationwide, new statism had died away for several years after Federation in 1901, attributed by Page to an assumption that the new Commonwealth would support local projects.<sup>144</sup> In 1908 a petition from north Queensland containing over 58,000 names was presented to the Commonwealth Parliament.<sup>145</sup> Two years later, state Labor MP T.J. Ryan, a future Premier, secured the passage of a motion through the lower house of state parliament to divide Queensland into three. In 1915 the issue re-emerged in the Riverina and northern New South Wales. Material concerns and a sense of being ignored by Sydney underlay the northern revival, but there is disagreement over what constituted the precise grievances. Although the failure of the state government's Decentralisation Commission of 1911 to deliver observable outcomes was one factor, Page wrote also of drought and wartime legislation that fixed butter and wheat prices at artificially low levels. Ellis added calls for a bridge linking Grafton and South Grafton: studies by J.J. Farrell and J.B. O'Hara later pointed to demands for rail links, ferry services across the Clarence and the removal of a dangerous reef from the river mouth.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> North Coast Development League for the Grafton Chamber of Commerce, *The Clarence Gorge Hydro-Electric Scheme: Harnessing 100,000 Horse-Power*, Grafton, 1919, pp. 12-3, (no specific author given, but likely to have been Page); Ellis, 'The Story of Nymboida, notes for Sir Earle Page', *op. cit.*; also 'Clarence Gorge Development – History of Investigations and Offers of Assistance from Three Federal Governments and Seven State Governments', c. 1954, EPP, folder 1798.

<sup>144</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>145</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>146</sup> On the Decentralisation Commission, see Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 4.; also Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *ibid.*, p. 61; John Joseph Farrell, *Bones for the Growling Dog?: The New State Movements in Northern New South Wales 1915-1930*, MA (Hons.) thesis, Department of History, University of New England, 22 July 1997, p. 20; O'Hara, 'A Doctor in the House', *op. cit.*, pp. 87-8; and Ellis,

But all these accounts agree that Page led this 1915 resurgence.<sup>147</sup> On 7 January 1915 a public meeting was held at Grafton to discuss a dispute over the payment of costs for the Clarence ferry service. Alderman Page altered the meeting's direction by successfully raising a motion for northern separation, either to form a new state or to merge with Queensland. He proposed that an investigative committee confer with communities across the north and in southern Queensland in preparing a full report. Page sat on this eight member "Literary Committee", which in April duly presented a document articulating local grievances to a further public meeting. The document bore characteristic Page references to The Gorge's hydroelectric potential and "the psychological moment", possibly his first public use of this shorthand for a receptive political and public mood.<sup>148</sup> This and a second April meeting resulted in formation of the Northern New South Wales Separation League, with Page prominent on its nine member executive.<sup>149</sup> Page also emerged as the movement's leading propagandist, such as through articles in the *Daily Examiner* cast as a debate between Page and a new state sceptic dubbed 'Rocky Mouth'.<sup>150</sup>

Page had no doubt that it was he who relaunched the movement, and in his memoirs detailed how he followed up the January 1915 meeting. Page began by consulting with local lawyers and journalists to draft a case for separation, and described the April forum as "one of the most representative meetings ever held in Grafton." This was all well covered by the *Daily Examiner* ("twelve and a half columns" he recalled). He travelled with local lawyer Fred McGuren to regional centres including Kyogle, Lismore, Casino and Ballina to address

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*New States for Australia, op. cit.*, p. 130. The Riverina movement also proposed following economic ties by incorporation into Victoria.

<sup>147</sup> See for example Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party, op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>148</sup> *A New State: Proposed Separation of Northern New South Wales: A Statement Compiled and Published by the Committee appointed at a Public Meeting held in Grafton, in January 1915*, Grafton, 1915, no author given, copy at EPP, folder 1889 (ii). The references to The Gorge and "the psychological moment" are at pages 18 and 22 respectively. A detailed account of the 7 January 1915 meeting is provided in the *Clarence and Richmond Examiner* of 9 January 1915, p. 2.

<sup>149</sup> O'Hara thesis, pp.11-4, 24-5; O'Hara 'A Doctor in the House', *op. cit.*, p. 88; and Ellis, *New States for Australia, op. cit.*, pp. 129-30; Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, pp. 60-1.

<sup>150</sup> For examples of a Rocky Mouth article with riposte see the *Daily Examiner*, 9 October 1915, p. 4, and 15 October 1915, p. 4. O'Hara in his thesis suspects that Page wrote both roles, p. 29.

public meetings and form new branches of the Separation League.<sup>151</sup> This is all an early instance of the *modus operandi* that Page was to employ for decades to come – approach selected influential figures for support, follow up with appeals to the wider public, and throughout keep proselytising through the local press. Less successfully, Page led a party inland to Tamworth, where he was rebuffed by V.C. Thompson who thought that concerted campaigning should await the end of the war. (There was a distinct Tablelands-North Coast rivalry).<sup>152</sup> In December 1915 Page was one of “a band of keen local enthusiasts” who bought the *Clarence and Richmond Examiner* to recast it as the *Daily Examiner* and appointed McGuren as chairman of directors.<sup>153</sup> This purchase was overtly strategic: Page told his wife in 1916 that the newspaper would be “the medium for having our views carried into effect.”<sup>154</sup> Four *Daily Examiner* board members sat on the Literary Committee.<sup>155</sup>

Pushing for such massive realignment of government was indeed hardly likely to gain momentum during a major war. The northern New South Wales movement faded as leaders like Page enlisted and the state government finally completed a prominent local project, the Glenreagh to South Grafton railway.<sup>156</sup> Despite this, it had attracted the commitment of figures such as Page, and gave him both wide exposure and a network of influential local contacts that he later drew upon when seeking to enter national politics.

### **Page’s war and what he gained from it**

In January 1916 Page joined the First Australian Imperial Force’s (AIF) Army Medical Corps. The inquisitive, striving Page approached war service as a chance to broaden his skills. He wrote to his wife from Cairo looking forward to

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<sup>151</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-2; O’Hara ‘A Doctor in the House’, *op. cit.*, p. 89; O’Hara thesis, *ibid.*, pp. 27-8.

<sup>152</sup> Farrell thesis, *op. cit.*, pp. 25.

<sup>153</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>154</sup> Page to Ethel Page, 13 September 1916, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 7, folder 72, quoted in Sally Collier, ‘Earle Christmas Grafton Page: A Doctor for the Nation’, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>155</sup> *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 9 January 1915, p. 2. The four were Page, McGuren, W.F. Blood, and E.G. Elworthy. Other members of the committee included the mayors of Grafton and of South Grafton.

<sup>156</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, p. 131; O’Hara thesis, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

“some distinctly military surgery” after which “I would be content to go home.”<sup>157</sup> Captain Page was initially posted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian General Hospital and remained on active service for just over a year in Egypt, England and France. In Egypt he took up his commanding officer’s suggestion to visit the new Aswan Low Dam. In France he spent five months at a casualty clearing station, where during heavy fighting over 1916-17 he and his colleagues dealt with as many as 900 cases a day.<sup>158</sup> Two of his brothers also served – Harold as an infantry officer and Will as a medical officer.

From December 1916, Page sought to return to Australia, if necessary by arranging a direct swap with Will, then still in Australia. In March 1917 he was finally permitted to return on personal financial grounds and the understanding that his remaining partner at Clarence House would enlist in his place.<sup>159</sup> Page arranged to travel back via North America at his own expense so as “to study major hydroelectric developments there.”<sup>160</sup> This, he told Ethel, would also fulfil an “overpowering desire to see the American states and Canada”, which he expected to be unlike “staid and too stiff” Europe where “conditions are bitterly unequal.”<sup>161</sup> (Page’s taste for overseas travel with a self-improving purpose continued after the war and beyond: another early such trip came in 1922 when he visited Java, Singapore and Malaya with the entrepreneur and Nationalist

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<sup>157</sup> Page to Ethel Page, 28 July 1916, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 7, folder 72.

<sup>158</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>159</sup> Page’s intention to return before war’s end was quite open and not necessarily untoward. In December 1916 he asked Surgeon-General Neville Howse, who Page had known since his student days, about returning and corresponded with the Defence Department accordingly; see Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 9, folder 71 (a) and (b), including Earle Page to Ethel Page of 24 November 1916. The official history of Australia in the Great War notes that out of a total of 1,242 AIF medical officers, some 300 returned to Australia in line with AIF policy of releasing those “due for a rest and employment in Australia.” Howse himself had a declared policy in 1917 of releasing medical officers who felt aggrieved by continued service. See A.G. Butler *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services, 1914–1918, Volume II – The Western Front*, 1st edition, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1940, pp. 830-3 (the foregoing quote is at p. 831). Page’s early return does not seem to have raised public opprobrium: for example, mention of his then former war service to the 1917 Australasian Provincial Press conference still elicited applause. In his memoirs Page fleetingly referred to returning due to illness: see Page, *ibid.*, p. 64. Howse later became a rural Nationalist MP and Page’s colleague in the Bruce-Page Cabinet; see Michael B. Tyquin, *Neville Howse: Australia’s First Victoria Cross Winner*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 1999.

<sup>160</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>161</sup> Page to Ethel Page, undated but probably late 1916, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 9, folder 71.

MP H.E. Pratten, and was dismayed by the poor marketing of Australian goods.<sup>162)</sup>

Page had a ‘good war’ – short and personally rewarding, without direct involvement in combat. His exposure as a surgeon to the immediate results of battle barely features in correspondence to Ethel or in the short account in his memoirs, possibly reflecting a mixture of reticence and wartime censorship. His letters are more focussed on the professional benefits of wartime doctoring. Even when still in France he reflected on “an experience that one would not have missed.” Page concluded that “the best thing of all is the meeting men from every school of medicine in the world finding them with similar ideas and measuring oneself by their standards and getting a true comparative estimate of his ability + capacity.”<sup>163</sup>

Foreshortened as it was, Page remained proud of his war service. In his 1917 speech to the Australasian Provincial Press Association he did not hesitate to use wartime anecdotes, declaring for instance that “unification” so possessed him that “during the long nights in France he had thought of little else.”<sup>164</sup> Looking back on his public life much later, he reflected on how wartime collaboration “firmly inspired my belief in the ideals and benefits of Commonwealth co-operation, which later I was able to carry forward in my political career.”<sup>165</sup> During his service and trip back to Australia, Page noticed that in “the small states of the United States of America and of Europe...railways are built to encourage, and not discourage, trade.” This was when he “realised that no true nation could be welded together until there were more partners with small enough states to realise their inter-dependence and give complete interstate free trade that was the real reason for our federal union.”<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, p. 99.

<sup>163</sup> Page to Ethel Page, undated but probably late 1916, *op. cit.*

<sup>164</sup> Earle Page, *A Plea for Unification, op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>165</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>166</sup> ‘Australian Country Party Complimentary Dinner to Sir Earle Page’, *op. cit.*

### **What sort of person was Page?**

The foregoing gives a strong sense of Page as being unusually purposeful and energetic. Considering what sort of individual emerged from these formative experiences, which shaped his approach to policy, is an essential part of understanding why and how he conducted his political career.

Ulrich Ellis first met Page as a member of the press gallery when Federal Parliament sat in Melbourne. He subsequently worked with him between 1928 and 1961 variously as a personal secretary, Country Party scribe and tireless new state campaigner. Ellis wrote extensively on Page, most tellingly in his history of the Country Party. He portrayed Page as conducting politics “with reckless energy, native cunning and a certain contempt for the orthodox rules of the game.”<sup>167</sup> Above all, “his main driving force was ideas, and they were legion”, such that “singleness of purpose – or purposes – was perhaps his predominant characteristic.” Though rarely ill, “his longest spells in bed were the results of occasional accidents precipitated by absent-minded driving while haranguing his passengers.”<sup>168</sup> A Country Party MP from Queensland, Charles Russell, also perceived a “ruthlessness” behind Page’s “generally gay and debonair personality”, that he thought typical of Country Party leaders.<sup>169</sup> Such comments, the 1917 speech and many other public and private statements suggest that Page thought of himself as being on a very special mission far more important than anything he could achieve as a mere surgeon.

Although Page spoke clearly enough before large audiences, some interlocutors noted difficulty with his often gushingly enthusiastic style of conversation. Even as staunch an admirer as Ellis reported that Page’s recollections for *Truant Surgeon* “rarely contained verbs and often no subjects and predicates, and...he seldom finished a sentence or a thought.”<sup>170</sup> But Page could moderate his speech to talk lucidly when required. The

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<sup>167</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 322, 323.

<sup>169</sup> Charles W. Russell, *Country Crisis*, W.R. Smith & Paterson, Brisbane, 1976, p. 83.

<sup>170</sup> Account provided to journalist Cecil Edwards and reported in Edwards’s *The Editor Regrets*, Hill of Content, Melbourne, 1972, p. 182.

parliamentary officer Frank Green, not a Page admirer, wrote that this “tough individualist” had such a facility with words that “the only way to conduct an argument with Page with any hope of success was in writing.”<sup>171</sup> As can be seen from the many speeches and writings drawn upon in this thesis, he was very capable of well-ordered argument, reflected in his indefatigable use of mass communications – radio, film, booklets and particularly the rural press.

Ellis also dwelt upon Page’s self-centeredness. That “the very universe revolved around him and his plans” tended to determine his personal interactions. Page “had no reluctance in impressing the services of any person from a Prime Minister to a journalist or a humble messenger.”<sup>172</sup> Ellis generously added that “if he seemed selfish or unduly demanding, he could feel that he was obeying the dictates of his destiny which impelled him to push forward regardless.”<sup>173</sup> It is perhaps telling that Page did not respond to humour of which he was the object.<sup>174</sup> Arthur Fadden recalled Page as “sometimes an irritating and exasperating colleague”, leading to such outbursts as that mentioned in the introduction. But he also remembered Page as being “like a father to me from the time I entered the House,” and producing “a veritable flood of ideas on every conceivable subject.”<sup>175</sup>

Page’s intense approach to policy issues greatly coloured how he worked as a party leader and minister. He had a strong desire to leave a lasting legacy that reflected his personal sense of mission, which itself derived from a powerful mixture of family tradition, desire to replicate the harmonious community of his childhood and Methodist commitment to earthly progress. Ellis touched on Page’s fundamentally emotive approach to issues – and inadvertently identified his foremost weaknesses – by commenting that “he rarely worked from premise to conclusion but proceeded from the original idea to its justification, arguing the case in reverse before he allowed it to burst upon the public.”<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Frank C. Green, *Servant of the House*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1969, pp. 35, 103.

<sup>172</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, pp. 323, 326.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327.

<sup>174</sup> Ellis quoted in O’Hara thesis, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>175</sup> A.W. Fadden, *They Called Me Arty: The Memoirs of Sir Arthur Fadden*, The Jacaranda Press, Milton, 1969, pp. 81-2.

<sup>176</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

That Page saw himself as working towards a higher purpose was also reflected in his being undeterred by failure, to which he responded with a long, patient wait before trying again. When another opportunity arose, he simply announced his specific goal and proceeded to push ahead almost regardless of barriers he was sure to face, especially when not constrained by a strong Prime Minister. Invariably, he applied his trademark energy and inventiveness but also his tendency to see ready solutions to complex problems. At some crucial moments he imprudently dismissed his critics as sadly misguided, such as on the inevitability of new states.

Unlike many other self-styled visionaries, Page was a cultural conservative who admired the British Empire as a force for international stability. But reading, education and sojourns in Sydney and overseas gave him a broader perspective than the typical rural activist. Page read widely: in July 1935 the Parliamentary Librarian recorded him as having borrowed a work on economic planning by the English socialist G.D.H. Cole, a biography of Czech President Edvard Benes, studies of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and of Japan's role in the Pacific, as well as some unspecified "mystery stories."<sup>177</sup> Yet his interpretation was frequently narrow, aided by creative use of selected statistics. He habitually seized upon whatever seemed to justify his existing views, such as unqualifiedly interpreting writings by the historian and philosopher of urban life Lewis Mumford as confirmation of the inherent evil of big cities.

Page's policy forays invariably reflected faith in the power of political action. He continued to believe, with only minor qualifications, in the ready ability of government to create conditions that would develop both economy and society along the proper decentralised and regionalised lines. This faith, however, exceeded his confidence in politicians and public servants as individuals, hence a consistent preference for utilising outsiders from private industry to help guide implementation of his policies. In this, he conspicuously lacked the early Country Party's distrust of banks and other big business.

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<sup>177</sup> Parliamentary Librarian to Page, 19 July 1935, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 1, folder 3.

Page had some self-appreciation of his unconventionality in democratic politics. Although a highly respected local member, he was not a populist who looked to the masses for guidance or sought to use their supposed will as backing for his actions. Contrary to the early Country Party's egalitarian mores, Page was convinced of the prime role of the leader. As something of a historicist, he spoke of natural laws having driven all societies, notably the decisive role of bold leaders and the superiority of compact, homogenous states. In personal notes, Page reflected on how the historian Arnold Toynbee "points out fundamental basis of successive civilisations been saved and transmitted to posterity by virile minority", no doubt a reflection of how he saw himself.<sup>178</sup>

Page often felt it necessary to package a rarefied goal with something more publicly acceptable, such as linking economic planning to defence preparedness. In private he bemoaned the reluctance of the citizenry to see at once the merits of his appeals to action. In 1921 he told the editor of the *Coffs Harbour Advocate* that the closure of local public works by the state government was due to "the supineness and apathy of the North, in not unanimously and enthusiastically getting behind the separation movement," as he had "urged them to do for many years."<sup>179</sup> But as will be seen in following chapters, he nonetheless foresaw public opinion as eventually catching up with him, particularly if the public had been gradually acclimatised to a well-timed initiative and a visionary leader seized the psychological moment.

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<sup>178</sup> Notes for a speech, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 4, folder 41 (a). Page's own underlining; undated, but from late in his career. Page referred here to Toynbee's *History of Civilisations* – he no doubt he actually meant *A Study of History*, published progressively in twelve volumes over 1934-61.

<sup>179</sup> Page to editor of the *Coffs Harbour Advocate*, 25 January 1921, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 1, folder 1.

## **CHAPTER 2 – PAGE’S RISE TO NATIONAL PROMINENCE**

Earle Page had luck, as all politicians need. He entered national politics at a formative time that made possible his rapid emergence into national prominence. This chapter, covering the late 1910s and early 1920s, begins by explaining his initial electoral success in his native Grafton and his ensuing transformation into a national figure. His ascendance reflects the rural activism that led to the rise of the Country Party, as well as his own dynamism in asserting a vision for the nation. In particular, Page’s strategic leadership of the resurgence of new statism helped him build a personal network of rural elites associated with this cause, while his closely related advocacy of regionalism and decentralisation was his first distinctive contribution to national political debate.

This rapid rise culminated in Page in February 1923 assuming a near ideal position from which to attempt to influence national policy: he was Commonwealth Treasurer, *de facto* Deputy Prime Minister and leader of a party that held almost half the positions in Cabinet. The Bruce-Page government took office during a resurgence of national optimism and unhesitatingly accepted responsibility for reinvigorating economic progress. It did not simply resume policies interrupted by the war, but sought to shape Australian governance so as to provide a more efficient basis for national development. This helped establish the 1920s as an era of innovative national policies, conducive to Page’s personal plans for shaping a still formative nation. This chapter concludes with an account of co-operative federalism as a Page policy commitment that was also the new government’s first major policy initiative.

### **Page’s return from war and entry into public life, 1917-19**

When Page returned to Australia in June 1917, his personal world was brimming with promise. He had undertaken war service, built a career as a surgeon and was locally prominent for his political activism. New statism,

however, was still in a lull in the Grafton area. The war was continuing, a north coast drought had just broken and the state government was showing interest in a major new local project, the Nymboida hydroelectric power scheme.<sup>1</sup> Yet Page soon re-established himself as an energetic figure with a talent for publicity. Throughout the remainder of 1917 he wrote for the *Daily Examiner*, delivered public lectures, lobbied MPs and harried newspaper editors, later reflecting in a draft of his memoirs that “policies must be hammered continually into the minds of the public.”<sup>2</sup> He drew on his travels in North America to produce a series of press articles on how hydroelectricity amounted to “Lightening the Farmers’ Lot.”<sup>3</sup> Page particularly recalled being confronted by the parents of children he had delivered years before bemoaning the dearth of educational opportunities around Grafton: parliamentarians he accosted “seemed to have no thought-out remedy.”<sup>4</sup>

Immediately the war ended, new statism revived in several regions of Australia. This overlapped heavily with the wider rural agitation that became the basis of the appearance of the early Country Party. The strong revival in northern New South Wales was attributed by B.D. Graham to the onset of regional drought in New England and to the state government’s failure to provide new rail and port facilities.<sup>5</sup> Proponents shared a sense of rural marginalization: a pamphlet issued in 1920 warned that “where political power is combined with commercial supremacy the danger will always be that the political power may be used to advance the commercial interests of the centre at the expense of the remainder.”<sup>6</sup>

New statism’s local appeal and wide network of contacts amongst rural activists made it a strong basis for launching a political career. Proponents in the north included a preponderance of town-based figures drawn from the professions,

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<sup>1</sup> O’Hara thesis, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Collier, ‘Earle Christmas Grafton Page: A Doctor for the Nation’, *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Daily Examiner*, 23 June 1917, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Australian Country Party Complimentary Dinner to Sir Earle Page’, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

<sup>6</sup> From Northern New State Movement, *Australian Subdivision, Effect on Development, The Case for Northern New South Wales*, Glen Innes, 1920 (title page reads *Australia Subdivided: the First New State*), p. 8, quoted in Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

business and newspapers, collectively providing a milieu in which Page was at home.<sup>7</sup> This helped him build a diverse range of personal contacts from Chambers of Commerce, local government, farmers' and graziers' associations, and the rural press. They included the New England-based Thompson, Drummond, and P.P. Abbot, a Tamworth lawyer and MHR for New England 1913-9. Page also began to forge ties with like-minded figures from further afield such as F.B.S. Falkiner, a prominent sheep-breeder from the Riverina who was elected to the House of Representatives in 1913 with the help of FSA sponsorship.

Page's political rise was also greatly aided by rural protest finally starting to organise itself into an Australia-wide movement, leading eventually to a parliamentary Country Party. Rural protest already had a long but sporadic history of "political experiments", such as post-gold rush land reform leagues and the Victorian-based Kyabram movement's post-Federation demands for smaller government. These were typified by sudden emergence followed by rapid dissipation or merger with urban-based groups. But during the 1910s continuing rural insecurity led to "a cultural reaction to the dominance of the big coastal cities on the one hand and the pastoralist establishment on the other" that decisively strengthened moves towards the formation of rural-based political parties.<sup>8</sup>

Rural-based protest during 1910-20 was described by Graham as being fuelled by such unwelcome government intrusions as compulsory wartime marketing, tariffs, arbitration and referenda in 1911, 1913 and 1919 that sought unsuccessfully to greatly expand Commonwealth economic powers. He also identified the organisational skills necessary for political parties as being fostered by rural community entities, ranging from farmers' associations to

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<sup>7</sup> See Grant Harman, 'New State Agitation in Northern New South Wales, 1920-1929', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 63, part 1, June 1977, pp. 26-39, for an outline of support for new statism in this region. There is some evidence that new statism in the north had a socially narrower and more elite base than in other parts of the state; see Nancy Blacklow, 'Riverina Roused': Representative Support for the Riverina New State Movements in the 1920s and 1930s', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 80, no. 3-4, December 1994, pp. 176-94.

<sup>8</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

annual agricultural shows, co-operative companies and masonic lodges.<sup>9</sup> (Page's membership of the Grafton Freemasons from late 1917 would have added to his range of local contacts).<sup>10</sup> Wheat producers were especially prominent in providing early political leadership. This reflected the added challenges facing export-focussed producers vulnerable to international price fluctuations and who were often based on small holdings in drought-prone regions such as Victoria's Mallee.<sup>11</sup>

Wheat was also the subject of the first comprehensive wartime regulation of a primary industry. A compulsory wheat pool was instituted from 1915 that covered price control and shipping, jointly administered by the Commonwealth and the states.<sup>12</sup> Regulation was later extended to other primary producers, including dairy farmers and graziers. Producers' reactions were mixed, ranging from resentment of government control to growing comfort in centralised purchasing and guaranteed prices. Over time, their demands came to focus on a direct role in managing state-supported regulation and its post-war continuation.<sup>13</sup> When combined with deeper currents of countrymindedness and small producers' perceptions of exploitation, the broad political outcome was to encourage rural pressure groups to directly enter parliamentary politics.

Early manifestations included the appearance in 1912 of a country faction of the governing Liberal Party in Victoria that challenged the authority of Premier William Watt, and a faltering effort in 1913 by the FSA of New South Wales to foster a state country party. A distinct rural parliamentary party first appeared in Western Australia in 1914 when the local FSA and Country Party won ten state seats at separate elections that year for the upper and lower houses of State Parliament. In Queensland the following year the Queensland Farmers'

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 292-4.

<sup>10</sup> Website of the Museum of Freemasonry, <http://www.mof.org.au/articles/prime-ministers/86-prime-minister-earle-page.html>

<sup>11</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 97-8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 99-103, 139. These marketing arrangements provided for guaranteed sales and prices, with the Commonwealth fixing the prices of wheat and butter and operating compulsory purchasing pools for wheat and wool. As wartime schemes they were not ongoing, legislation for which would have raised significant constitutional problems necessitating the collaboration of the states.

Union won five seats. In 1915 a similar group also appeared in New South Wales, based on the FSA and calling itself the Progressive Party.<sup>14</sup> Both were anti-Labor, but concern to remain independent made them reluctant to accept portfolios in Liberal ministries. This raised a problem of how they could otherwise wield influence, later to be decisively addressed by Page.

The Victorian Farmers' Union (VFU), founded in the Mallee in 1916, rejected alignment with established parties in favour of seeking concessions from them: these parties would become "putty in the hands of an organisation" said one of the VFU leaders. It sought to reform the wheat pool and also attracted support from dairy farmers who resented Commonwealth fixing of butter prices, and from Goulburn Valley irrigation settlers seeking the repeal of barriers to acquiring the freehold of their leases.<sup>15</sup> Page however showed from the outset little personal or policy empathy with wheat farming militants. The VFU later became the main power base for several of his parliamentary colleagues and rivals, including Percy Stewart, Thomas Paterson, and Albert Dunstan. Another important early step towards a federal parliamentary Country Party was the formation of the Australian Farmers' Federal Organisation (AFFO) as a national body in 1916. This was by four major state bodies, the VFU and the FSAs of New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia, in response to the wartime regulation of primary industry.<sup>16</sup> The AFFO's platform included new states, the first time this issue had been adopted by a national organisation.

Page's final stepping stone to parliament was his February 1918 election to the mayoralty of South Grafton by his fellow councillors, attributed by Page's own *Daily Examiner* to the eminence of his family mixed with his advocacy of "unification" and of local government.<sup>17</sup> He immediately signalled that his interests were more national than local by placing a long article in the *Daily Examiner* on the "Case for Unification." Mayor Page told his constituents that "the early rapid development of the United States was largely due to the

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 82-90, 109-10; Davey, *The Nationals*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Graham, *ibid.*, pp. 110-1, 113. The quoted VFU leader was Isaac Hart.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

<sup>17</sup> *Daily Examiner*, 14 February 1918, p. 4.

comparatively small size of the subdivisions permitting true local self-government in the widest sense, giving the people a personal knowledge of their public men, and permitting these to have an intimate and intelligent grasp of the whole area they were administering.” He built on his August 1917 speech by observing that as the Australian states lacked historical tradition and respective unifying features they were ripe for “the unification of the whole country”, prior to “the localisation of local powers in small, compact inexpensively governed provinces.”<sup>18</sup> In April 1918 he won statewide attention by attacking Premier William Holman’s lack of commitment to the north coast at a local dinner in the Premier’s honour, drawing cheers from other diners – the district, Page said, needed cheap power, proper harbours and better communications with adjacent regions.<sup>19</sup>

In his memoirs, Page attributed his decision to run for parliament to his commitment to the new state cause and local public works, especially “water development.”<sup>20</sup> He also claimed to be acting on his own initiative, but in a 1961 speech said that “the leader of the movement” (unnamed, but probably Abbott) pressed him to nominate for Federal Parliament on a platform of local separation and development. Regional patriotism was strong, but Page recalled that he also wanted to “introduce the fight throughout the whole of Australian politics” for national subdivision and development.<sup>21</sup> Page announced on 11 October 1919 that he would stand as an independent at the forthcoming federal election for the north-eastern New South Wales seat of Cowper against the Nationalist incumbent John Thomson.

Page’s longstanding support for a new state and local development provided a ready basis for a campaign that played to local resentments. His own *Daily Examiner* offered unabashed support, assuring electors at the outset that Page

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 February 1918, p. 3. An example of his statements on hydroelectricity is in the *Glen Innes Examiner* of 7 July 1919, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> O’Hara article, *op. cit.*, pp. 90-1.

<sup>20</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> Page speech to the Annual Convention of the New England New State Movement, Grafton, 23 October 1961, New England New State Movement, UNE Archives, A0547, Box 33; see also Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 68. In his June 1956 speech to the dinner marking his retirement from the frontbench Page instead vaguely referred to “a petition from more than half of the people” as the trigger for his first run for parliament.

had “the ability, means and time to give to his country, and that the interests of the electorate would be safe in his hands.”<sup>22</sup> The more detached *Sydney Morning Herald* assessed Page as “a very popular resident” who had Thomson “caught at a severe disadvantage.”<sup>23</sup> Page in campaign mode used his private car to traverse the entire electorate twice, usually speaking in public three times a day, six days a week.<sup>24</sup> Despite his early return from active service, campaign advertisements featured him in AIF uniform.<sup>25</sup> Page maintained a studied independence from established party politics: although 1919 was the first national election to use preferential voting, he did not direct his supporters on second preferences.<sup>26</sup>

Page’s keynote speech for the campaign was delivered at Grafton on 22 October. It reaffirmed his August 1917 address and was the first prominent instance of a personal trademark – trying to marry the immediate interests of a local audience with his national vision. He ranged from local telephone services and the hydroelectric potential of the Clarence up to nationwide regional self-government, the dangers of state enterprises and the greater good of a more ordered national economy.<sup>27</sup> The people of Grafton were told that their local postal services “were starved in order that the Melbourne Post Office might be made the finest in the Southern Hemisphere.” Page presented as a committed fiscal conservative, calling what became known as vertical fiscal imbalance (whereby the Commonwealth collected excess revenue that it promptly transferred to the states to spend) “one of the prime causes of this orgy of extravagance.” He attacked the fundamentals of Australian governance by describing the “whole Federal system [as] made for wastefulness, as almost everything was duplicated” and called for a new constitutional convention. A revised Constitution “would enable national affairs to be controlled by a National Parliament” and shift regional matters to “local subdivisions of Australia that should be made according to community of interests”. Page touched on his still developing interest in planning by proposing the careful use

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<sup>22</sup> *Daily Examiner*, 24 September, 1919, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 December 1919, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> O’Hara thesis, *op. cit.*, pp. 79. O’Hara also provides Page’s full campaign itinerary, p. 110.

<sup>25</sup> Such as in the *Daily Examiner* of 11 October 1919, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> O’Hara thesis, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>27</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 670.

of tariffs “to establish secondary industries that the primary industries demanded”, and so “make the country self-contained.” He also proposed national insurance, an essentially contributions-based scheme to deal with the deprivations of unemployment, sickness and old age.<sup>28</sup>

There is a significant omission from Page’s 1917 and 1919 speeches. No reference was made to agricultural support schemes of guaranteed prices, produce pools, production quotas or export bounties – often collectively dubbed orderly marketing. These were already issues of debate and are widely regarded as having been the Country Party’s *raison d’être*. Page certainly supported such schemes, particularly for the wheat industry. But unlike many of his political colleagues, orderly marketing was not the foremost focus of his policy activism. Part of the reason is that over 1918-21 Australian dairy farmers opposed market regulation as having artificially depressed prices. During the 1919 campaign Page, seeking to represent a dairy-producing area, declared himself against “government interference with the dairying industry, and more especially with the price-fixing of primary products.”<sup>29</sup> But more fundamentally, he had frequent misgivings that the widespread subsidisation of industries would include those that were inefficient. Orderly marketing did become important to Page’s conception of how the national economy should be managed and to his party’s political strategies – he for example praised a new Dairy Produce Control Board when it was created in 1924.<sup>30</sup> But it was never the dominant feature of a much broader personal world view that saw salvation for primary producers as at least as likely to be found in regionalism, technology and planning.

Page proceeded to win Cowper with over 52 per cent of the primary vote, a strong result for an independent in a diverse electorate that stretched from his native Clarence Valley southwards to the Manning River and Taree. Thomson received a mere fifth of the primary vote, behind not only Page but also the Labor candidate. Page topped the poll in fifteen of Cowper’s sixteen major

<sup>28</sup> All quotes in this paragraph are from the *Daily Examiner*, 23 October 1919, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> See Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-2; Page quote from *Daily Examiner*, 23 October 1919, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> On Page and the Dairy Produce Control Board, see the Lismore *Northern Star*, 23 October 1924, p. 4.

population centres and won nearly 60 per cent of the primary vote in its biggest district, Grafton. The only major centre where he failed to top the primary vote was Kempsey in the south, and even there Thomson secured a mere 48 more votes more than did Page.<sup>31</sup> Why did Page triumph so readily and proceed to secure this seat as a local power base he held for the next forty-two years?

Firstly, Page maintained a very broad personal profile in the Grafton region. During the 1910s he had made his own additions to his family's reputation for conspicuous public service such as by serving on South Grafton council. Although a town-dweller, his medical practice gave him exposure throughout Grafton's extended hinterland. By contrast, the sitting member was, according to Page, rarely sighted in the electorate, a shortcoming not helped by his being ill in hospital for much of the 1919 campaign.<sup>32</sup> Thomson was used to little opposition, having been returned unopposed at the previous two elections. Page strengthened his ties to his electorate and credentials as a man on the land when in 1923 he was part of a syndicate that purchased Heifer Station on the Clarence River, a beef cattle property about 50 kilometres northwest of Grafton. (Page bought out the other owners in 1932.)<sup>33</sup> Ellis later described this property as Page's "pride of his personal possessions" where "he returned at every opportunity to renew his energies and his inspiration in close contact with his beloved river."<sup>34</sup>

Secondly, Page had strong ties to the local press. Newspapers were extremely important in rural Australia as means of regular communication across dispersed communities and of asserting rural identity.<sup>35</sup> In northern New South Wales they enthusiastically supported the local political movements and new state campaigns with which Page was engaged. Page and his business colleagues positioned the *Daily Examiner* as an agent for other northern papers. Page wrote of how the *Daily Examiner*, the *Lismore Northern Star*, the *Tamworth Northern Daily Leader* and the *Tweed River Daily* "developed a

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<sup>31</sup> O'Hara thesis, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>33</sup> See Jim Page, *The History of Heifer Station*, privately published, no date.

<sup>34</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

<sup>35</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 142. See also Blainey, *Black Kettle and Full Moon*, *op. cit.*, pp.104-9.

uniform policy on decentralisation and became the vehicles for our campaign.”<sup>36</sup> In June 1921, he also became an owner of the *Northern Star*, while fellow new staters controlled other regional publications – Thompson edited newspapers in Tamworth from 1911, and E.C. Sommerlad edited the *Inverell Argus* and, from May 1918, owned the *Glen Innes Examiner*.<sup>37</sup>

Thirdly, and most fundamentally, Page rode the aforementioned nationwide and local rise in rural protest politics. In October 1918 a North Coast Development League was formed to promote local public works, notably Page’s scheme to dam the Clarence. Page was elected League president, and the following year led a public road show along the north coast and then inland to the Tablelands. Ellis later commented that Page would have used such speaking tours to gauge public support for a run at Federal Parliament.<sup>38</sup> In April 1919 alone he addressed meetings at Inverell, Glen Innes, Armidale and Tamworth.<sup>39</sup> (David Drummond was impressed when he heard Page speak at Inverell, marking the start of his admiration of Page).<sup>40</sup> Northern New South Wales was to remain a stronghold of rural protest. At the state election of March 1920, for example, the Progressive Party received its highest share of the statewide vote in the northern seats of Northern Tablelands, Oxley and Byron.<sup>41</sup>

### **Page’s transformation into a national figure, 1919-23**

Page the nationally unknown new rural MP – intense, well-educated and more ‘townie’ than farmer – later claimed that he had entered parliament with few

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<sup>36</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>37</sup> Farrell, thesis, pp. 161-2; also *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entries on Thompson, (John Atchison, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/thompson-charles-victor-8782/text15397>, published first in hardcopy volume 12, Melbourne University Press, 1990), and Sommerlad (Rod Kirkpatrick, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/sommerlad-ernest-christian-8582/text14983>, published first in hardcopy volume 12, Melbourne University Press, 1990).

<sup>38</sup> O’Hara article, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>39</sup> Farrell thesis, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>40</sup> Jim Belshaw, *Decentralisation, Development and Decent Government: The Life and Times of David Henry Drummond, 1890-1941*, Ph.D. thesis, University of New England, submitted but subsequently put aside by its author; see <http://newenglandhistory.blogspot.com.au/2010/06/decentralisation-development-and-decent.html>, chapter 2, ‘Entry into politics 1907-1920’.

<sup>41</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-41.

personal ambitions and subject to just three years' leave of absence agreed to by his medical partners in Grafton.<sup>42</sup> In his maiden speech he assured the House of Representatives, rather disingenuously, that "it was almost by accident that I strayed into the by-paths of politics."<sup>43</sup> Looking back in 1955 he added that he entered national politics only as he had been unable to get results outside it.<sup>44</sup> But there are strong indications that the Page had harboured grand ambitions, not least as set out in his August 1917 speech. His obituary in the *Medical Journal of Australia* reported that during the 1910s members of his local community spoke of him as a future Prime Minister and that early in 1917 Page told his commanding officer he aspired to that office.<sup>45</sup> Ellis also thought that Page entered parliament with such hopes of high office, only to find that lesser ministerial rank was adequate for pursuing the policies that were his primary interest.<sup>46</sup> Page expanded his engagement with civic movements, especially new statism, to build a public profile far exceeding that of any other rural-based politician. A mere sixteen months after being elected, he was a national figure, leading the Country Party and issuing demands to a formidable Prime Minister.

Page's rise was helped by a post-war policy debates. One of these was a revival of popular interest in developmentalism. Proponents saw the young nation as now ready to realise its potential, aided by a keen sense of entitlement for rural Australia. The appeal of such optimism was marked by the success of Brady's 1918 *Australia Unlimited*, a profusely illustrated volume produced for the popular market. Brady asserted that Australia's farmlands, "highly fertile and unlimited in area", were capable of supporting a population of 200 million. Contrary to the obvious, he doubted "if there are a hundred square

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<sup>42</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, p. 70. Page added that in doing so his three partners "displayed a touching faith in the speed of parliamentary process whereby I would achieve constitutional reform, carve out some New States, and inspire the development of water conservation and electric power on the Clarence and on other Australian rivers."

<sup>43</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 4 March 1920, p. 194.

<sup>44</sup> Page speech on being granted life membership of the Country Party, 24 June 1955, quoted in Collier, 'Earle Christmas Grafton Page: A Doctor for the Nation', *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal, op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Obituary by Dr George Bell, Sir Henry Newland, Dr W.F. Simmons and Dr D.A. Cameron, *The Medical Journal of Australia*, May 12 1962, pp. 731-4.

<sup>46</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party, op. cit.*, p. 328.

miles of true desert within the whole area of the Australian continent.”<sup>47</sup>

Boosters such as Brady drew forth articulate critics, including the geographer Thomas Griffith Taylor, the science administrator David Rivett, and the pioneer environmentalist, James Barrett. (Taylor was particularly outspoken about environmental limitations and “could not resist ridiculing every sacred cow.”)<sup>48</sup> Hostile popular and media reactions to such critics reflected how ideas of national development had come to overlap with wider Australian patriotism.

Page’s continuing advocacy of unification and new states was aided by his entering parliamentary politics at a time of decisive evolution in Australian federalism. Ongoing sparring between the Commonwealth and the states helped create an audience for his visions and a debate for him to join. Many basics of governance at the national level in particular were still formative and hence highly contestable. In particular, the Commonwealth was seeking to increase its financial and other powers well beyond what the states had agreed to in 1901, encouraged by the war having boosted the role of central government. The Commonwealth takeover of customs and excise in 1901 deprived the former colonies of a quarter to a third of their total revenues.<sup>49</sup> As the Commonwealth initially collected far more than it spent, section 87 of the Constitution – the ‘Braddon clause’ – required it to return three quarters of these receipts to the states for the first ten years after Federation. In 1908 the Deakin government’s *Surplus Revenue Act* provided for the Commonwealth to retain remaining surplus funds rather than automatically also grant these to the states. The growth of national responsibilities imposed stress on these early fiscal arrangements, and in 1910-11 the Commonwealth fixed its payments to the states at 25 shillings per capita. These were provided on the Commonwealth’s terms with no guarantee of longer-term continuation and were vulnerable to price inflation.<sup>50</sup> In 1915 the Commonwealth’s introduction

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<sup>47</sup> Brady, *op. cit.*, pp. 37, 57.

<sup>48</sup> J.M. Powell, *Griffith Taylor and "Australia Unlimited"*, the John Murtagh Macrossan lecture 1992, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1993, pp. 25, 39-40.

<sup>49</sup> Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>50</sup> W.G. McMinn, *A Constitutional History of Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1979, p. 132.

of estate duties and a progressive income tax brought it into direct competition with the states for revenue.<sup>51</sup>

Increased Commonwealth activity elevated another Page passion to the forefront of discussion: state-Commonwealth policy co-operation. Although the constitutional debates of the 1890s assumed a clear division between these two main levels of government, it became evident soon after 1901 that they had essentially concurrent powers that necessitated close consultation. The earliest formalised mechanisms for co-operation were post-Federation Premiers' Conferences, convened by the states rather than the Commonwealth.<sup>52</sup> In 1915 complementary legislation enacted by the Commonwealth, South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria created the first significant inter-governmental agency, the River Murray Commission, empowered to regulate use of the river's waters.<sup>53</sup> Despite these early forms of co-operation, "tension had begun to develop between the legally restricted responsibilities of the federal government, as set out in a specific list of transferred powers, and the need for increased activity suggested by the Commonwealth's growing importance in the overall governance of the country."<sup>54</sup> This was inevitable in a federation that commenced with a small central government but then had to meet the growing needs of a new nation. Increasing Commonwealth assertiveness was exemplified by its convening of a Premiers' Conference on post-war reconstruction in September 1919, just three months before Page was elected to parliament.

The means of constitutional change was also evolving in a way that contributed to shifting the federal-state balance. By 1919 it was widely recognised that High Court judgments generally favouring the Commonwealth were more important than referenda to amend the Constitution or the voluntary surrender

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<sup>51</sup> Nicholas Brown, 'Government, law and citizenship', in Bashford and Macintyre, volume 2, *op. cit.*, p. 409.

<sup>52</sup> K.N.J. Bennie, 'The Premiers' Conferences: An Historical Sketch from the Beginnings to 1930', *Public Administration*, vol. 6, no. 7, September 1947, pp. 411-2.

<sup>53</sup> A.J. Brown, 'Subsidiarity or Subterfuge?: Resolving the Future of Local Government in the Australian Federal System,' *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, December 2002, p. 37.

<sup>54</sup> McMinn, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-5, 192.

of powers by the states.<sup>55</sup> The Court rejected a challenge to Deakin's *Surplus Revenue Act*, and in 1920 the famed Engineer's Case largely removed the concept of implied immunity of the states from Commonwealth law. This amounted to ushering in "the primacy of the Commonwealth, a primacy which was to develop in the next half-century into dominance."<sup>56</sup>

Debates on federalism acquired added impetus from high hopes engendered by the end of the war and a related widening of perceptions of the potential of national government. Wartime planning of industry and American-sourced concepts of industrial management encouraged a swing away from *laissez-faire* policies and towards ideas of efficiency in government and the planning of the economy. Duty-focused, collectivist views of society were promulgated by such policy thinkers as historian and adult educator G.V. Portus, Frederic Eggleston and the industrial psychologist Elton Mayo, as well as by organisations such as the Workers' Educational Association (WEA).<sup>57</sup> Page read widely in search of ideas and supporting arguments, and by the early 1920s began to show an interest in concepts of national planning and efficiency that became prominent in the Bruce-Page government. The most directly important of these new intellectual figures for Page was F.A. Bland, an associate of Portus who became an increasingly outspoken advocate of political decentralisation and efficient public administration. Bland wrote in a 1923 WEA publication of a shift of emphasis from traditional "negative" government functions of external security and internal order towards more positive functions "arising out of the social, intellectual, artistic and economic conditions of modern times." These included education, public health, "public utility schemes" and "the fostering and development of economic resources."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 130, 138.

<sup>57</sup> 1915 saw, for example, publication of the proceedings of a wartime conference on industrial planning as *National Efficiency – A Series of Lectures* by the economist R.F. Irvine and others, Victorian Railways Institute, Melbourne 1915. In 1919 Portus produced *An Introduction to the Study of Industrial Reconstruction*, WEA of New South Wales, Sydney, 1919, and *The Problem of Industry in Politics*, WEA of New South Wales, Sydney, c. 1919, that enthusiastically cited British exemplars for industrial planning. See Moore in Walter, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-8, 158.

<sup>58</sup> F.A. Bland, *Shadows and Realities of Government: An Introduction to the Study of the Organisation of the Administrative Agencies of Government with Special Reference to New South Wales*, WEA of New South Wales, Sydney, 1923, p. 3.

Bland was to become a prominent admirer of many of Page's ideas, especially on planning and related co-operative federalism.

Finally, and most fundamentally for Page, he entered parliament when tension and change in the established political parties created openings for the emergence of a national Country Party.<sup>59</sup> Without this, he might indeed have returned to Grafton after just one term. Continuing internal tensions weakened the two major parties and left neither well-placed to respond forcefully to growing support for rural candidates.<sup>60</sup> The party system had already begun to assume a recognisably modern form with the 1909 Fusion of the anti-Labor Free Trade and Protectionist Parties to form the first Liberal Party, and the continued rise of the ALP to form a majority government in 1910. The war had heightened political tensions generally by sharpening social divisions, such as between ex-servicemen and those who stayed at home, Catholics and Protestants, and capital and labour. (Industrial disputes in 1919 accounted for a then record 6.3 million man-days).<sup>61</sup>

In the run-up to the 1919 election and after, the main anti-Labor party was beset by continuing difficulties in assimilating discordant elements. Some of this discord arose from the Fusion having brought together two formerly rival parties. But much was attributable to the unexpected need to also accommodate ex-ALP leader Hughes. In November 1916 he and his immediate supporters had stormed out of the ALP over the conscription issue. They briefly formed a Cabinet of their own before joining the Liberals in February 1917 to create the Nationalist Party as the basis of a united ministry. The ALP split in every state except Queensland, resulting in the Nationalists easily winning the federal election of May 1917. The end of the war the following year released tensions in a government that had been unified

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<sup>59</sup> The early history of the Country Party is well documented in Graham's, Aitkin's and Davey's accounts. See Graham, *op. cit.*; both Davey histories, *op. cit.*; and Don Aitkin, *The Colonel: A Political Biography of Sir Michael Bruxner*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1969. Note also Brian Costar and Dennis Woodward (eds.), *Country to National: Australian Rural Politics and Beyond*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985, which has an emphasis on the post-World War Two Country Party, including at the state level.

<sup>60</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

<sup>61</sup> Ian Turner, '1914-19' in Frank Crowley (ed.), *A New History of Australia*, William Heinemann, Melbourne, 1974, pp. 352, 354.

primarily by the exigencies of the war effort. In December 1919 Hughes's instinctive economic interventionism saw him lead his government into an unsuccessful referendum (conducted simultaneously with the federal election) seeking greatly increased Commonwealth powers over intra-state trade and commerce, trusts, combinations, monopolies and industrial affairs. There was further unease over Hughes's support for state-owned enterprises, such as the Commonwealth Shipping Line and ventures into radio and oil refining.<sup>62</sup> The Prime Minister was also widely distrusted within his own party for his autocratic style. The Hughes problem was to present Page during his first term in parliament with a unifying target for his early leadership of the Country Party.

He also gained from perceptions that Hughes was anti-rural. Although Australia's GDP actually diminished by almost 10 per cent between 1914 and 1920, many rural industries did well, with pastoralism buoyed by British wartime acquisition of wool and prices for most rural products remaining high after peace was declared.<sup>63</sup> But a strong perception that the Nationalist government increasingly favoured urban over rural interests helped give Page and his political confreres both purpose and prominence. All major farmers' organisations other than the VFU had supported the Nationalists for the duration of the war. But this support rapidly dissipated from 1918 as the Hughes government signalled its intention to extend regulation and protection. Its mid-1918 decision to fix the price of meat sold in metropolitan markets outraged graziers. In March 1919 the Commonwealth's announcement of plans to greatly increase tariffs to shield manufacturers from imports and compensate for the small scale of local demand drew hostile reactions from farmers' organisations. Fears that a federal parliamentary rural party would divide the non-Labor vote largely evaporated when the Hughes government introduced preferential voting after the May 1918 by-election for the seat of Flinders, at which a VFU candidate had threatened to split the vote. (This

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<sup>62</sup> Stephen Garton and Peter Stanley, 'The Great War and its aftermath, 1914-22', in Bashford and Macintyre, volume 2, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>63</sup> For summaries of the economy in this period see for example Yule in John Connor, Peter Stanley and Peter Yule, *The War at Home: The Centenary History of Australia and the Great War, volume 4*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2015, p. 75; Turner in Crowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 352, 354; and Simon Ville, 'The economy', in Bashford and Macintyre, volume 2, *ibid.*, pp. 385-7.

candidate's withdrawal enabled Stanley Bruce to enter politics by winning this seat).<sup>64</sup> Farmers' organisations also opposed the December 1919 referendum, again with the notable exception of the VFU.<sup>65</sup>

The main mover in organising such rural unrest into a federal Country Party was the AFFO and its constituent state bodies. Initially, it demanded that the Australian Wheat Board, formerly an object of resentment for wartime management of the wheat pool, be made a permanent body offering secure purchasing. The state organisations convened a series of joint meetings that culminated in the AFFO in August 1919 adopting a broader federal platform than its predecessors, in good time for the forthcoming federal election. This document reflected rural producers' mixed attitudes to government intervention by calling for tariff reform, rationalisation of federal and state functions and freedom from excessive regulation, but also for producer representation on the various boards and commissions regulating their interests. The AFFO platform also overlapped with Page's sentiments, such as on co-ordination between levels of government. But by its falling far short of his full national vision on regionalism and electrification, it is also evident that Page differed from the emerging mainstream of rural agitation. Nor did the AFFO yet amount to a united nationwide political party: its four member bodies proceeded to issue their own manifestos, albeit each based on the AFFO's platform.<sup>66</sup>

In October the Graziers' Association of New South Wales accepted an invitation from the FSA to declare its support for the new rural-based Progressive Party, helping to broaden it beyond small wheat farmers.<sup>67</sup> Good showings at by-elections by candidates endorsed by farmers' organisations led them to endorse a total of twenty-seven candidates nationwide at the 1919 election. One of these was Page, who gladly accepted the FSA's apparently

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<sup>64</sup> Graham comments that "one of the Country Party's most cherished myths" is that it was mainly responsible for the introduction of preferential voting by virtue of rural involvement in the Flinders by-election. He states that the Hughes government was already drafting a bill for this, although the electoral tactics of farmers' organisations probably accelerated its introduction; *ibid.*, pp. 128-9.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 115-6, 118-9.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130; Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-8. The full text of the platform is reproduced in *The Land*, 29 August 1919, p. 11.

<sup>67</sup> Aitkin, *The Colonel*, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-3.

unsolicited support as it “provided the very machinery I sought and appropriate allies should I be elected to parliament,” an indication of his intention to pursue a program of change.<sup>68</sup> This came so late in the campaign that he undoubtedly would still have won without the FSA imprimatur. Page was already a convert to the idea of a Country Party. He later wrote that his opening campaign speech owed much to Falkiner, now running for the Senate, who had called for “a solid Country Party that will vote as such.”<sup>69</sup>

The 1919 election was indicative of the still formative nature of the Australian party system, especially the lack of a clear focus for the rural protest vote. Out of a House of 75 members, it returned thirty Nationalists, twenty-six ALP members, eight ‘Farmer-Nationals’ endorsed by the Nationalists or farmers’ organisations, three Liberals from South Australia, five VFU representatives, two members of the Western Australian FSA and one independent Nationalist.<sup>70</sup> This nonetheless amounted to a breakthrough for rural political movements at the national level, with fifteen farmers’ organisation endorsees elected. Page was one of eleven who agreed to a proposal by the MHR for the Victorian electorate of Grampians, Edmund Jowett, to caucus together. They unanimously resolved “that this party shall be known as the Australian Country Party, and shall act independently of all other political organisations.”<sup>71</sup>

All of the eleven had gone to the election without the backing of a dedicated party structure or platform other than what was provided by the various farmers’ organisations. They had few agreed policies beyond generalities concerning support for rural Australia, cutting taxes and opposing socialism. Yet the press reported that the new Country Party expected “to be able to exert a considerable influence on the Government’s actions, especially in such matters

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<sup>68</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, p. 68. Page in his memoirs mistakenly refers to endorsement by the AFFO instead, an error that Graham says Page did not make in a 1956 interview with him; see Graham, *ibid.*, p. 131. Many of the other 26 ran as candidates for a state farmers’ organisation or as rural-oriented Nationalists. The New South Wales FSA and the Queensland Farmers’ Union had endorsed candidates for the 1913 federal election but the eight elected did not go on to form a distinct party; see Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 92, and Davey, *Ninety Not Out, op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> Page, *ibid.*, p. 69. The term Country Party was already well-established, though not ubiquitous; Graham references its use in New South Wales in 1893, *ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>70</sup> Graham, *ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>71</sup> *Argus*, 23 January 1920, p. 6.

as the proper exercise of economy in public expenditure.”<sup>72</sup> Although six of the eleven had some parliamentary experience, Page recalled them as “untried cohorts,” who were “fortified by our political innocence and backed by an indestructible optimism.”<sup>73</sup> His colleagues were three VFU members (W.G. Gibson, W.C. Hill and Stewart), a Victorian grazier (Jowett), a Victorian dairy farmer (Robert Cook), a Tasmanian newspaper proprietor (William McWilliams), a Western Australian parliamentarian (Harry Gregory), a wheat farmer and former Mayor of Perth (John Henry Prowse), a Queensland pastoralist and parliamentarian (Arnold Wienholt), and a New South Wales dairy farmer and pastoralist (Alex Hay). The only state not represented was South Australia: Page had a near fully national parliamentary network to work with.

Page was not their first leader. McWilliams, one of only two with appreciably long parliamentary experience, was chosen to lead on a one-year trial basis with Jowett as his deputy. Page became party Secretary and Whip. At a meeting in Melbourne in February 1920 the AFFO formally approved the new party styling itself as the Australian Country Party.<sup>74</sup> By the end of 1920 avowedly rural parties had been established in every state except Tasmania, and those in Victoria and in New South Wales had been consolidated by good showings in state elections.<sup>75</sup> AFFO delegates and Country Party federal parliamentarians met in Sydney in March 1921 where they adopted a platform more reminiscent of Page’s own national agenda. This provided for constitutional reform via a convention, subdivision of the states, decentralisation, planned marketing by producers and consumers, and the “scientific investigation, complete survey and tabulation of the resources” of the nation.<sup>76</sup> McWilliams lost the party leadership the following month. Page attributed this to the leader’s “increasing tendency to vote against the majority”

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<sup>72</sup> *Age*, 23 January 1920, p. 7.

<sup>73</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>74</sup> Davey, *Ninety Not Out*, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-9.

<sup>75</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 90, 132; Davey, *The Nationals*, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-4. The Progressive Party won fifteen seats at the New South Wales election of March 1920.

<sup>76</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70. The AFFO still soon became increasingly pre-occupied with more conventional issues. Its 1922 conference focused on new markets for wheat, representation on the Tariff Board, dairy and sugar prices, non-European labour, taxation reform and duty on sulphur; see *The Land*, 23 June 1922, p. 11.

and added that his own ascension was entirely at the behest of his parliamentary colleagues. (He even claimed to have been the only caucus member not to vote for a Page leadership).<sup>77</sup>

An important factor in Page's rise within the Country Party was the fluidity of its policies and strategies. The early rural parties – the Progressive Party in New South Wales, the VFU, the federal Country Party and others – were each united only by their generalised fear of rural decline. They attracted and accommodated rural interests ranging from small wheat farmers to town-based professionals and large-scale graziers, all with differing expectations of the new party. Graham described the rural political movement of 1914-19 as characterised by “sudden changes of direction, muddled strategies, and confused aims”, with early party doctrine immediately after the 1919 election similarly “vague and formless.”<sup>78</sup> W.K. Hancock saw the Country Party of the twenties as “a coalition of diverse interests.”<sup>79</sup> Aitkin assessed the early party as being “a coalition of forces, in its case pulling together the separate interests of wheatfarmers, dairyfarmers, graziers and townsmen, and providing them with an overarching loyalty to the Country and an institutionalised suspicion of the City.”<sup>80</sup> Supporters espoused causes as varied as new states and soldier settlement but were divided on orderly marketing and free trade.

Such a formative new party provided just the sort of inclusive political and policy environment that could accommodate “shrewd and determined” individuals like Earle Page.<sup>81</sup> So singular a figure would not have been nearly as successful within a more established party, whether the Nationalists or the ALP. Page also had the advantage, as party leader, of not being identified with any one rural class or producer group, an important element in sustaining his leadership. Page was quite distinct from the rural radicals associated with small wheat farming (notably the outspoken and inflexible Stewart) and from the wealthier pastoralists (such as Jowett). Page evidently initially softened his

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<sup>77</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>78</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 96, 143.

<sup>79</sup> W.K. Hancock, *Australia*, Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1961 (first published 1930), pp. 200-1.

<sup>80</sup> Don Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales: A Study of Organisation and Survival*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1972, p.1.

<sup>81</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

opinions when dealing with his peers, Graham describing him as then being “a political novice” and, less accurately, “not a man of strong opinions”, who consequently got on well with most of his new colleagues.<sup>82</sup> Working day-to-day as an equal partner in a wider movement was not Page’s instinctive preference: this was to become evident in his engagement with fellow new staters during the early 1920s.

A string of issues with wide rural appeal helped the Country Party consolidate itself under Page’s leadership. In July 1921 the government finally approved the Massy-Greene tariff (named for the Minister for Trade and Customs). This established a broad and high tariff structure as a basis for manufacturing-led development, and was consolidated over the next few years by the Tariff Board’s responsiveness to appeals by individual manufacturers for protection.<sup>83</sup> Manufacturing accordingly increased its share of GDP from about 13 per cent to 18 per cent between 1920 and 1931.<sup>84</sup> This marked shift in development policy away from rural industries was contested by country interests who saw tariffs as imposing costs on such capital equipment as reapers, binders and wire, and as affirming the urban bias of the Hughes government. The new tariff, continuing debates over decontrolling wheat, wool and dairy production, and demands for rural credit as prices started falling from late 1921 all gave the nascent Country Party a firmer sense of purpose. (Hughes announced in April 1921 that wheat pooling would end – but, after some complicated political manoeuvres, agreed to guarantee voluntary pools formed by the states.<sup>85</sup>) There was also a widely-shared belief that parliament had lost control of government expenditure, with the result that high taxation was constricting industry.<sup>86</sup> The issues that featured in Page’s election policy speech of October 1922, his first as party leader, mark the growing breadth of his party’s interests. They included decentralisation, government expenditure (we are “the watchdog of the public interest, and a break on waste” said Page), public debt, arbitration, tariffs, provision of rural credits to farmers by the Commonwealth

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>83</sup> Butlin, Barnard and Pincus, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>84</sup> See Sinclair, *The Process of Economic Development in Australia*, *op. cit.*, pp. 14, 179; also Garton and Stanley, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>85</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-7.

<sup>86</sup> ‘Australian Country Party Complimentary Dinner to Sir Earle Page’, *op. cit.*

Bank, constitutional reform and the future of wartime marketing arrangements.<sup>87</sup>

Another major factor in Page's success is that turbulent relations with the Hughes government earned him national attention. The early Country Party saw itself as honourable and apolitical – quite unlike how it perceived Prime Minister Hughes. It took pride in its undisciplined, slightly chaotic ways.

Consider the following statement by Page soon after he became party leader:

The Country Party is essentially a party distinct from any other, and decides to remain so, because it is suspicious of the influences behind the other parties. It has its own organisation, its own offices, its own party rooms; but has not a signed party discipline that compels its representatives to vote for principles they disapprove of simply because another party or the Government advocates them. It supports good government and good legislation. It does not seek office, but it will not refuse to take the responsibility for its actions if called upon to do so.<sup>88</sup>

Page as party leader at once launched attacks on Hughes. Page benefitted from the Prime Minister's instinctive habit of publicly responding to criticism, recalling that "within six months his attitude had made me one of the best-known members of the House and recognised throughout Australia almost as readily as himself."<sup>89</sup> Page's 1922 election speech assailed the Prime Minister as a breaker of promises and made veiled references to the ex-Laborite who must surely be behind the creeping socialism enveloping the nation.

The political uncertainty of the time made the stance of Page and his party a matter of national significance. Following the 1919 election, the Hughes government did not quite hold a secure majority in the House of Representatives. The Country Party's "search for a strategy" at first appeared to be a choice between a coalition with the Nationalists or preserving its independence by instead freely bargaining for concessions from either larger

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<sup>87</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 October 1922, p. 9. Page explained in his memoirs that rural credits were foremostly to assist farmers when their sales are spread over a long period; see *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 145-6.

<sup>88</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 20 April 1921, p. 7502; Page was quoted here by the Labor Member for Cook, J.H. Catts, drawing on a report in the *Sydney Sun*.

<sup>89</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

party.<sup>90</sup> It settled on trying to influence the government without bringing it down, Labor being a worse alternative. But mixed messages that gave the strong impression of unpredictability enhanced the Country Party's influence. Page publicly refused to grant Hughes immunity from a no-confidence vote and even pointedly declined to provide any guarantees when the Prime Minister went abroad on official business.<sup>91</sup> Uncertainty was heightened by the Country Party's unpreparedness to vote solidly in the House. A motion to reduce the size of the 1921-22 budget came within a single vote of bringing the government down. The Party's position was only definitely clear after it unambiguously secured the balance of power at the 1922 election and saw an opportunity to remove Hughes.

Finally, the hyperactive Page established a widely-recognised persona with a special strategic place of his own. Unpredictable as the new Country Party was, most of its MPs' contributions in parliament were limited to workaday issues. Amidst prosaic debates on returned servicemen, tariffs, expenditure on a new capital city and public service salaries, Page had an unusually broad and strong sense of direction. Despite Graham later calling Page's speeches "rambling and disorganised", they read well in Hansard and helped make him the effective leader of debate on many national issues. His speech to the House of 7 April 1921 in response to the Massy-Greene tariff is a good example of his pushing discussion in new directions. He only briefly addressed the agricultural marketing and trade issues then preoccupying most of his colleagues, saying more about amenities in the countryside that would aid decentralisation, targeted tariffs to support selected industries, "thoroughly comprehensive power schemes throughout the Continent", railway freight rates that were constricting industry in country towns, the "degeneration and ill-health" of city dwellers, greater constitutional powers for the Commonwealth and "subdividing the present big states."<sup>92</sup> Although cautiously worded by Page to match his status as the new leader of his party, this speech is highly reminiscent of the expansive national vision of his August 1917 speech.

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<sup>90</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

<sup>91</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, pp. 84, 88-92.

<sup>92</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 7 April 1921, p. 7282, 7284; Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

### **Regionalism and decentralisation: the basis of Page's vision**

Page during this first term in parliament expressed his policy persona foremostly through his commitment to regionalism and decentralisation. The shift of industry and population away from big cities, and the related regionalisation of government structures, remained his most fundamental policy goals after he had been elevated to leadership of the Country Party. This was far more than an incarnation of the yeomanry-closer settlement ideal that already had a long history in Australia. Summarising his case for new states in 1924, Page said that the “higher civic spirit” arising from giving people “complete power of controlling their own local development” would “provide opportunities for the mobilisation of the local knowledge of local resources which do not exist under the present large states of Australia.”<sup>93</sup> He stressed that this should not merely be an extension of existing local government, but rather the “creation of a new self-governing administration” not beholden to a distant capital city.<sup>94</sup>

In presenting decentralisation and regionalism so ideally, Page was projecting his personal memories of the Grafton community onto the entire nation. On new states, as on almost any given issue, Page had broader goals than most of his peers. He treated each proposed new state, including northern New South Wales, as a possible step towards a nationwide network of self-governing bodies. Most new staters were reacting to a specific local grievance and so sought a simple two-way breakup of their state to form a single new entity, such as a New England or a North Queensland. Page signalled his preference for considerably smaller and multiple entities by his pointed use of such terms as “federal units”, “local subdivisions”, “provinces” or “small self-governing areas,” rather than new states.<sup>95</sup> He also laced his statements on regionalism with populist references to how these new entities would relieve the “grossest

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<sup>93</sup> Page's evidence to the Cohen Royal Commission, *The New State in Northern New South Wales, Resources, Finance, Government: Statement of the Case*, Northern New State Movement, Tamworth, 1924, p. 2.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>95</sup> See for example Page's August 1917 speech, p. 3, his article in the *Daily Examiner* of 16 February 1918, p. 3, and his 1919 election speech as reported in the *Daily Examiner* of 23 October 1919, p. 3.

extravagance both in national and State affairs”, such as through leaner local legislatures.<sup>96</sup> Page’s regionalist and decentralist vision animated much else that he pressed for as a new parliamentarian, including hydroelectricity and constitutional reform.

Page was also an early advocate of a link between decentralisation and the provision of the social amenities and infrastructure needed to sustain rural populations. He drew on fresh memories of country doctoring in arguing that the difficulty of retaining settlers on the land was as much due to lack of basic facilities as to the failure to pay a fair price for their produce. In his first term in parliament, he portrayed railways as much as hydroelectricity as the foremost means of easing “the monotony and drudgery of country life”, drawing on his observations in North America.<sup>97</sup> Occasionally his decentralist ponderings slid into tantalising dalliances with yet wider concepts of social reorganisation. Responding to the left-wing Labor MP Michael Considine in November 1920, Page said he would be willing to experiment with agricultural communes “in some remote corner of the Commonwealth.”<sup>98</sup>

Unusually amongst federal parliamentarians of his time, Page welcomed plans for Canberra as providing a model for decentralisation based on small cities.<sup>99</sup> Conversely, he saw centralisation in big cities as the root of much evil, and was prepared to state this bluntly. E.C. Mumford, Secretary of the Taxpayers’ Association of New South Wales, must have been taken aback by a Page letter of February 1921 informing him that “your Association will never get anywhere except it starts at the root of the problem, and the fundamental difference which has caused Australian development to lead to the possession of a series of states in which the capital is practically one-half of the total, is due, in my opinion, to the operation, first, of the unwieldy size of the states, which contributes most largely to the development of the professional politician, and

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<sup>96</sup> *Daily Examiner* of 23 October 1919, p. 3.

<sup>97</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 19 November 1920, p. 6760.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6761.

<sup>99</sup> See for example an untitled typed note at EPP, folder 1624, no date but appears to be pre-1927; also Page’s comments about Canberra’s founding in *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, chapter 18.

the embarkation into government enterprises which gives to that politician enormous and uncontrolled patronage at his disposal.”<sup>100</sup>

This all amounted to a remarkable personal vision of Australian governance cast in spatial terms to achieve social and economic ends. There are three intertwined specific themes here – decentralisation, the nationwide regionalisation of governance and the creation of new states. Although the first two are the more fundamental, with new states essentially Page’s means to them, new statism was his second most important political platform during his early years in parliament after the Country Party itself. New statism was also vitally helpful to the early Country Party which, lacking its own strong formal organisation, drew upon this and related rural-based civic movements.

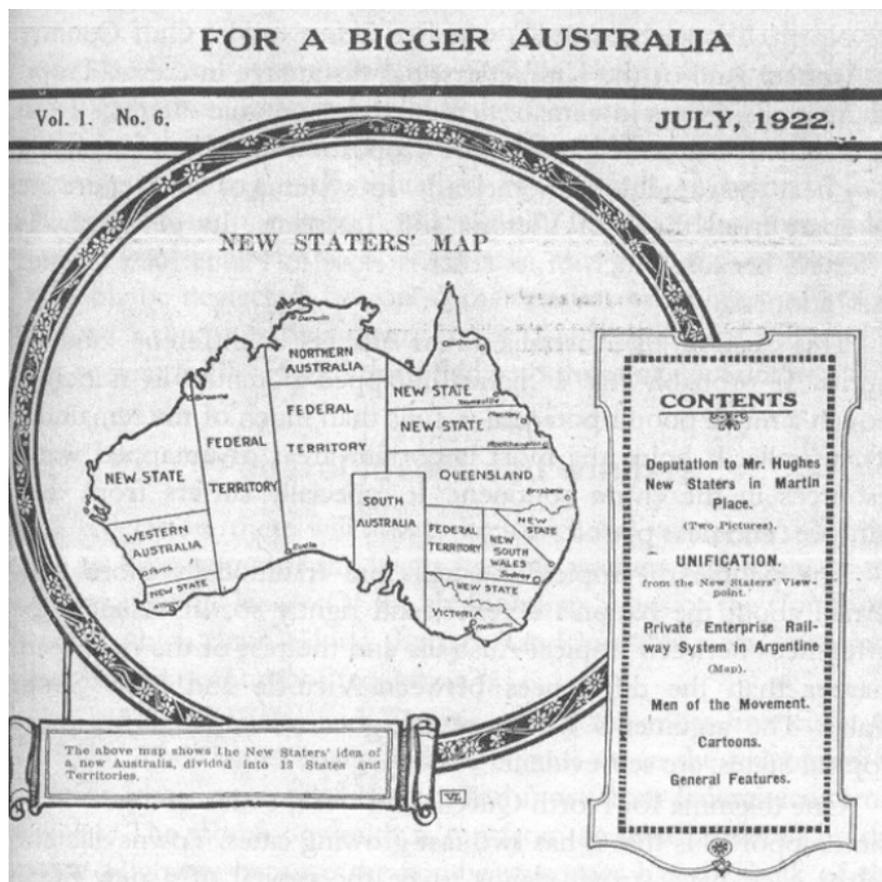


Figure 5: cover of V.C. Thompson's New State Magazine, July 1922, envisaging mainland Australia divided into fifteen states and territories. Note the reference to a delegation to Prime Minister Hughes.

<sup>100</sup> Page to Mumford, 24 February 1921, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, Box 1, folder 1.

From a twenty-first century perspective, the new state cause may seem outlandish. Yet in the early 1920s, it was a highly emotive issue that drew on a mix of intellectual and popular support. V.C Thompson's *New State Magazine* ran maps of the nation divided into an array of new states and territories, and cartoons portraying each big Australian city as an overweight toff sporting a top hat and large cigar (perhaps influenced by Labor Party iconography).<sup>101</sup> Advocates drew on long-standing resentment of the urban concentration of public works and social services. Such resentments have been said to be typical of new areas of European settlement that were yet to consolidate a political compact between country and city, and in Australia reflected also the internal diversity of the larger states.<sup>102</sup> The political scientist R.S. Parker saw the demand for new states as "practically unique" to Australia due to the sharpness of the contrast between a few big cities and a sparsely settled countryside.<sup>103</sup> Also, Australia's system of governance has long accorded only a minor role to local councils as against that of the metropolitan-based state governments.

Since Page saw new states as steps towards Australia-wide regionalism, he encouraged advocates to campaign as a united movement working to a national agenda – "the new state movement is not a local movement", he said in June 1924.<sup>104</sup> Supporters of a national approach were usually policy-orientated intellectuals such as Bland, and the barrister and constitutional lawyer John Latham. Most accounts of new state movements portray them as products of commonplace resentments about government resources, thereby underplaying the deeper reasoning of thinkers like Page. New statism was also a major basis of early challenges to the fundamental wisdom of the Constitution of the still young Commonwealth.

There was considerable variation in the strength of specific new state movements. When Page entered public life the best organised was that in his native northern New South Wales. It remained so over the next several

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<sup>101</sup> See in particular *The New State Magazine*, July 1921 and July 1922 issues.

<sup>102</sup> R.G. Neale, 'New States Movement', *Australian Quarterly*, September 1950, p. 9.

<sup>103</sup> Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>104</sup> *Dubbo Western Age*, 27 June 1924, p. 2.

decades, perhaps not coincidentally given his strategic leadership. (It was often called the New England movement, although it included the north coastal region). Similar movements persisted, to varying degrees, in the Riverina, the Monaro, western New South Wales, and central and northern Queensland. New statism was weaker in the more compact Victoria and Tasmania: and in South Australia and Western Australia it was constrained by the paucity of population outside the capital cities. (Exceptions were short-lived movements on the Western Australian goldfields in the 1890s and later in the state's southwest).

Decentralisation, regionalisation and new statism together form a long, complex story that waxed and waned throughout Page's career. While a true believer, he nevertheless was prepared to suspend his new state campaigning whenever he saw little hope and needed to instead give priority to the Country Party's coalition with its urban-based partner. But his personal commitment never dissipated, signalled by the alacrity with which he would seize an opportunity when success appeared feasible. In the early 1920s, as the Country Party exerted political power for the first time, new states seemed likely. There emerged two main schools of thought on reorganising governance to implement regionalism. One proposed a unitary system under which all sovereign power would lie with a national government that delegated authority to regional governmental units at its own pleasure. But new state advocates invariably favoured a truly federal system in which sovereign regional entities were guaranteed a high degree of autonomy. They were very conscious of the distinction between regionalism that enabled local political control, and a nominal regionalisation based on a top-down system that merely delegated to regions. Page agreed that it was critically important that regions have sufficient authority to guide their own development, without being countermanded by a distant city-based government.

Page welcomed support for his cause from whatever source, including from across the party divide. The ALP rivalled the early Country Party in perceiving deficiencies in Australian federalism, but with the fundamental difference of proposing a national government fully empowered to implement the ALP's

wider programme. From 1918 the replacement of state governments with regional authorities beholden to the Commonwealth featured at ALP conferences. In 1920 the ALP issued a pamphlet dividing Australia (with Papua-New Guinea) into 31 provincial legislatures, all entirely dependent on the national government for revenue.<sup>105</sup> Labor support was thus of limited use to most bona fide new staters. Yet Page managed both to condemn the ALP proposals as supporting unification of the wrong sort and to welcome them as an affirmation of his own views. In a November 1920 letter to the *Daily Examiner* he cast them as indicating “a widespread awakening to the necessity shown by our new state propaganda of alterations of the present state boundaries.”<sup>106</sup>

Page’s regionalism and decentralisation raised obvious tensions which detracted from his effectiveness as an advocate. Foremost was his continued insistence on a strong central government and consequent difficulty in defining a suitable balance with his autonomous federal units. In his maiden speech to parliament in March 1920, Page proposed the Commonwealth’s “complete control of all national activities”, only to be queried by a Labor interjector as to why he didn’t support outright unification.<sup>107</sup> For decades, Page’s stance has understandably long puzzled scholars. In 1950, R.S. Neale miscast him as being close to the ALP’s stance on a strong central government that delegated to regions.<sup>108</sup> In 2005, A.J. Brown commented that the August 1917 speech illustrated “the mysterious way in which Earle Page held to both unification and new states as a goal.”<sup>109</sup>

Characteristically, Page was not overly troubled by this evident contradiction. A strong central government suited his deep-seated wish to impose his own

<sup>105</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, pp. 140-2; *New State Magazine*, August 1921, pp. 4-5.

<sup>106</sup> *Daily Examiner*, 8 November 1920, p. 3. (This page is missing from Trove but a copy of the letter is in the Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 1, folder 1).

<sup>107</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 4 March 1920, pp. 195, 196.

<sup>108</sup> Neale, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-3.

<sup>109</sup> A.J. Brown, ‘The Constitution We Were Meant to Have’, *op. cit.*, p. 52. The political scientist A.J. Davies, commenting after the narrowly unsuccessful northern New South Wales new state referendum of 1967, also noted that Page had told the Cohen Royal Commission that he preferred to refer to new provinces rather than states “because that would properly indicate to the public the fact that they are to deal with the local problems of the local development of their areas and not to encroach on the domain of national policy”; see Davies, ‘The New England New State Movement – A Political Analysis,’ paper to the Australasian Political Studies Association, Ninth Annual Conference, Melbourne, 21-24 August 1967, p. 3.

agenda. Page's attempts to resolve this were only stated in the broadest of terms. In October 1923 he spoke to a new state convention in Rockhampton of a national government that was "able to plan, but will not be able to execute the details of the plan", and by concentrating purely on "high policy" would leave "the spade work of development and settlement" to "local self-governing authorities."<sup>110</sup> Whether Earle Page – schemer, planner, driver – would in practice have sat back in a national government to give local authorities such freedom remains moot.

Demands for new states recurred over decades, suggesting a long term underpinning of regional and community sentiment that intellectual activists like Page, Drummond, Thompson and Ellis could draw on. Even if new states were always improbable, the considerable emotional energy they were capable of generating reflected some deep-seated perennials of Australian life – rural protest based on a keen sense of equality in entitlement, awareness of the burden of geographic isolation, local patriotism, and ready assumptions about a nexus between politics and economic development. This all gave Page a receptive platform outside the political mainstream for most of his career. But he was to face a major challenge in his attempts during the 1920s and early 1930s to unite inherently localised new state activism into a nationwide force capable of establishing his federal units across Australia. Even Page, with his unique standing amongst new state activists as a major national figure, would remain strongly identified with the northeast of New South Wales.

### **Page's national leadership of new statism: his rallying cause 1920-23**

The early 1920s were the heyday of new statism, providing Page as a rising new MP with a ready rallying point for attempting to instil his spatial concepts of regionalism and decentralisation into national policy. The issue passed through two distinct stages: a strong revival in 1920-23 associated with the emergence of the Country Party, but then unexpected failure before the 1924-25 Cohen

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<sup>110</sup> Earle Page, *New States – Why They are Necessary in Australia – Speech by Dr Earle Page*, delivered to the New State Convention, Rockhampton, October 1923, Northern New South Wales New State Movement, Tamworth, 1923, p. 3.

Royal Commission into new states that was convened by the New South Wales government. Against a background of continuing anxiety about accelerating urbanisation – the Australian metropolitan population grew by over 37 per cent between 1921 and 1933, the rural by 20 per cent and the urban provincial by a mere 8 per cent – energetic new proponents vied amongst themselves and with Page for attention.<sup>111</sup>

Page's home region of northern New South Wales became the nation's driver of new statism. Although the movement claimed to be non-political, it was clearly strongly linked to the upper echelons of the Country Party. In addition to Page, prominent supporters included Drummond (a Progressive and Country Party MLA 1920-49, and MHR for New England 1949-63), Michael Bruxner (a Progressive and Country Party MLA 1920-62, and party leader 1922-25 and 1932-58), P.P. Abbott (Country Party MHR for New England 1913-19 and a Senator 1925-29), Thompson (Country Party MHR for New England 1922-40) and Sommerlad (a Country Party MLC 1932-52). Thompson's organisational contribution shifted the movement's hub towards his home town of Tamworth. In January 1920 he published a series of newspaper articles on new states that later appeared as a booklet with a foreword by Page.<sup>112</sup> In March 1920 a New State Press League was established at a local newspaper conference Thompson organised at Glen Innes.<sup>113</sup> Two months later, an estimated over 5,000 people attended the inauguration of the campaign in Tamworth called by the local council.<sup>114</sup> At Glen Innes in August, the Tamworth and Inverell New State Leagues formed a united Northern New State Movement, with Abbott as president and Thompson as General Secretary.<sup>115</sup> Thompson took temporary leave from editing the *Northern Daily Leader* to devote himself full time to the

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<sup>111</sup> Heather Radi, '1920-29', in Crowley, *op. cit.*, p. 359.

<sup>112</sup> The booklet was V.C. Thompson, *The New State, Embracing Northern New South Wales: A Series of Articles Published in the Daily Observer, Tamworth, and Addenda*, Daily Observer, Tamworth, 1920; see John Joseph Farrell, 'Opting Out and Opting In: Secession and the New State Movements', *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal*, No. 40, 1997, p. 140.

<sup>113</sup> Farrell, *ibid.*, p. 141; Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-3.

<sup>114</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 May 1920, p. 10; Harman, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>115</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, p. 153. Harman notes that some authors have mistakenly referred to this Northern New State Movement as a League – the central organisation was the 'Movement' and individual branches 'leagues'; see Harman, *ibid.*, pp. 27, 38.

cause and personally produced *New State Magazine* from July 1921 to June 1923.<sup>116</sup>

This all proved more durable than the short-lived 1915 Grafton-based movement. New statism now had the dedicated Thompson active on the ground and the firm support of the local press, encompassing a larger, more viable region. Perhaps too, it was propelled by the release of aspirations bottled up by the immense distraction of war. Page spoke later of his entering parliament at a crucial “psychological moment to get results” when “the First World War was just over.”<sup>117</sup> As major causes for the early Country Party, new statism and decentralisation briefly provided him with a more comfortable fit with his party peers than at any other stage of his career.

Page provided new statism with strategic leadership. *New State Magazine*, to which Page contributed the foreword to the inaugural issue, records how he tried to rally the new state faithful across the nation, such as by addressing the May 1921 meeting of the Riverina movement and travelling on to Western Australia that same year.<sup>118</sup> He was not alone in this nationwide proselytising – Thompson accompanied him to Queensland, Drummond went to the Riverina and Bruxner travelled to Western Australia – but Page held a unique status as leader of the federal Country Party.<sup>119</sup> New statism also enlivened Page’s public jousting with the Prime Minister. Unable to get the existing states to act, Page and other activists turned to trying to amend section 124 of the Constitution to shift the decisive say on new states from state parliaments to a local referendum. Over 1920-22 the parliamentary Country Party called repeatedly for a constitutional convention as a prelude to a referendum on this at the 1922 election. Page wanted every state divided into four electorates that would each provide three convention delegates, thereby producing a northern New South Wales delegation.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Farrell thesis, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>117</sup> ‘Australian Country Party Complimentary Dinner to Sir Earle Page’, *op. cit.*

<sup>118</sup> *New State Magazine*, July 1921, p. 17; and August 1921, p. 27.

<sup>119</sup> Farrell thesis, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>120</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

Prime Minister Hughes promised action, then dallied. In November 1921 his government introduced a bill for the election of convention delegates from House of Representatives seats, but withdrew this following strong and varying objections from MPs of all three major parties. During a May 1922 visit to Grafton, Hughes flickeringly raised hopes by commenting that “if by a New State you mean the opportunity of helping yourselves I am with you to the end.” (His visit was cut short when he broke a collar bone riding and became Page’s patient).<sup>121</sup> But two months later Hughes concluded that the Commonwealth could not act ahead of state government support.<sup>122</sup> This reversal contributed decisively to Page’s determination following the 1922 election to remove Hughes from office.

The new state movement benefitted greatly from the growing public reputation of the new member for Cowper. Although Thompson remained prime organiser, he never matched Page as a strategist or as the most prominent new stater. This became central to public perceptions of Page. The *Sydney Sun* in April 1920 dubbed him “the possible future Prime Minister of Pacifica.”<sup>123</sup> Hancock in 1930 wrote of Page as “the apostle” of the new state movement.<sup>124</sup> Other major political figures who engaged with new statism were dabblers by comparison. Premier Ted Theodore of Queensland, for example, proposed in 1922 the creation of new states but only after unification had been achieved, in line with ALP policy.<sup>125</sup> (There was a parliamentary consensus in Queensland that the state was too big, but less agreement on how to rectify this). A few prominent non-parliamentary figures, such as the Anglican Bishop Radford of Goulburn, approached Page’s breadth of vision, but lacked his persistence and national profile.<sup>126</sup> There are hints of tension over Page’s prominence, such as a short but sharp reference in *New State Magazine* to his not being part of the movement’s rank and file.<sup>127</sup> Thompson publicly attributed

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<sup>121</sup> Hughes almost immediately denied that his comments meant he was supporting a new state; see Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-8.

<sup>122</sup> Farrell, ‘Opting Out and Opting In’, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

<sup>123</sup> O’Hara thesis, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>124</sup> Hancock, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

<sup>125</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

<sup>126</sup> See for example Radford quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 30 January 1924, p. 13.

<sup>127</sup> *New State Magazine*, August 1921, p. 30.

the formation of the Northern New State Movement to the efforts of his newspaper, and pointedly referred to Page as instead covering the federal parliament.<sup>128</sup> Page in any case preferred proselytising and high-level political manoeuvring to the tedious detail of organising and fundraising.

Page's strategic role included an ambitious attempt to organise a national new state movement. This was first seriously signalled at the April 1921 convention of the northern New South Wales movement at Armidale, which attracted delegates from afar as central Queensland and Albany in Western Australia.<sup>129</sup> Page took a leading role at the important All Australian New States Convention of July 1922 held at Albury. This was the first time that new state enthusiasts had met on an expressly national basis and was used by Page to endorse a broad strategy. Delegates came from northern New South Wales, the Riverina, Queensland and the Western Australian goldfields. Organisations present also reflected intellectual interest in decentralisation, and included the Decentralisation League of Victoria, the Australian Legion (a Melbourne-based body that endorsed the Country Party and counted Latham as a member) and the Sydney-based Australian New States League.<sup>130</sup>

Page led the convention's discussions on strategy. As a constitutional convention was now in doubt, he proposed that all new state organisations bring the issue before their respective state parliaments so as to test the possibility of success under section 124. The anticipated negative results would clear the way for seeking a referendum to shift the basis of approval to local votes.<sup>131</sup> But Page was not in full control of proceedings. His proposal that a preliminary convention of "skilled technical advisers" produce tabulated data prior to any constitutional convention was defeated, presumably for fear of delegates being effectively sidelined. (A heavy reliance on data was a feature of much of Page's new state proselytising). The conference appointed Page and nine others to the Executive of a new All-Australia New States Movement,

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<sup>128</sup> Thompson, *The New State*, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-50.

<sup>129</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-5.

<sup>130</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

<sup>131</sup> Farrell thesis, *op. cit.*, p. 124; *New State Magazine*, September 1922, p. 4.

with Page as President.<sup>132</sup> This body seems to have come to little, but the Albury convention did help spark debate that led to the only occasion that the New South Wales parliament endorsed a new state. In September 1922 it agreed to a motion moved by Bruxner supporting a northern new state, but only after the Nationalist Secretary for Mines and Forests F.A. Chaffey, a new state sympathiser from the state's north, had it amended to shift its focus to the federal government and the still hoped-for constitutional convention.<sup>133</sup>

The wider Northern New South Wales Movement attached greater importance than did Page to building what Thompson dubbed "a people's movement."<sup>134</sup> It circulated petitions, organised public meetings and tried to build a hierarchical structure around a central executive, district councils and local leagues.<sup>135</sup> By October 1921, 197 local leagues had been created.<sup>136</sup> But popular support fluctuated with specific local grievances. Protest such as over the lack of a Tablelands to north coast railway provided too narrow a base to sustain interest in an entire new state.<sup>137</sup> In 1921 a petition expected to gather about 200,000 signatures instead managed an estimated 30,000-40,000.<sup>138</sup> A 1922 appeal to raise £25,000 for a fighting fund generated less than £500.<sup>139</sup> The number of local leagues had dwindled to 12 by March 1923, evidently as they had long since served their immediate purpose of electing delegates to the northern New South Wales movement's 1921 Armidale convention.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> *New State Magazine*, September 1922, pp. 5-7; see also Harman, *op. cit.*, p. 32. Subsequent press reports of the Executive include the *Adelaide Register*, 11 June 1923, p. 11, referring to it proposing new state boundaries and overtures to the ALP.

<sup>133</sup> Aitkin, *The Colonel*, *op. cit.* pp. 77-8.

<sup>134</sup> *New State Magazine*, November 1921, p. 16.

<sup>135</sup> V.C. Thompson, 'Why I Think the New State Movement is a Winner,' *New State Magazine*, July 1921, pp. 4-5.

<sup>136</sup> Farrell, 'Opting Out and Opting In', *op. cit.*, p. 134.

<sup>137</sup> Farrell thesis, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 117-8. Ellis omits this and other major failures from his history *New Australian States*.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158. This claim was made in 1924 by William Green, a former mayor of Tamworth who had dropped out of the new state movement.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

### **Page creates a power base: forging the coalition with the Nationalists**

The 1922-23 creation of a coalition between the Country Party and the ruling Nationalists raised Page's hopes of re-ordering the nation and elevated him to the forefront of government. Page played a decisive role in this, which as a lasting feature of Australian politics alone secures for him an important place in political history. It also earned him a unique standing within the Country Party by identifying him with a political strategy that helped ensure its long-term survival.

Page early sensed an opportunity to benefit from Nationalist Party disunity. He signalled to its growing anti-Hughes element the possibility of a mutually productive alliance. In mid-1922 he spoke of how the Nationalists' "more sober element was getting very tired of the thinly disguised socialism and the theatrical posturing and extravagance of the Prime Minister," and that "the Country Party must with the assistance of some party whose ideals were framed on the same lines, get into power, otherwise the Commonwealth Parliament would decay and would not rise to its destiny."<sup>141</sup>

Although Page was central to the creation of a coalition at the national level, he was more chief proponent than originator of this strategy. There was a precedent at the Commonwealth level in the form of the Reid-McLean Ministry of 1904-05 that shared out portfolios between Free Traders and Protectionists.<sup>142</sup> The Western Australian Country Party joined into an anti-labour coalition as early as June 1917. Federally, Hughes suggested a coalition in November 1921 in the wake of the parliamentary vote on the budget that nearly toppled him, the core of a wider offer that also proposed massive cuts to Commonwealth expenditure.<sup>143</sup> In September 1922 the President of the Western Australian Primary Producers' Association (formerly the FSA), Alex Monger, became the first Country Party leader to propose specific terms for the Country Party's willingness to continue in coalition. This included demands that

<sup>141</sup> "More sober element...", *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 26 May 1922, p. 4; "the Country Party must...", *Argus*, 15 June 1922, p. 9.

<sup>142</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 103-4, 170, 178; also Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

Country Party representation in Cabinet be proportional to its numerical strength in parliament, and that it hold all portfolios directly affecting primary industries.<sup>144</sup>

Hughes again offered a federal coalition in the run up to the December 1922 election. This election resulted in the Country Party winning 14 seats to the Nationalists' 26. The Nationalists lost their tenuous parliamentary majority and the Country Party now clearly held the balance of power. Page set terms for a coalition that insisted on a separate identity for the Country Party and such a "distribution of portfolios as will give the Country Party power as great as its responsibility."<sup>145</sup> The Nationalists appointed a negotiating team of six that included Hughes and Stanley Bruce. Page was one of three Country Party negotiators, but his own account makes clear that the negotiations were largely his own show. Ellis later wrote that Page "regretted" being unable to consult all Country Party members.<sup>146</sup>

Actively assisting the Country Party in these manoeuvrings was John Latham, who had just been elected as an Independent Union Liberal MP. Latham attended Country Party caucus meetings, primarily as he could not on personal and policy grounds countenance sitting as a Nationalist while Hughes, who he had unhappily accompanied at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, still held office (a further indicator of the early Country Party's openness). Page recalled him as "more than an honoured guest for over a year", who provided "the benefit of his practical wisdom and his sage legal advice."<sup>147</sup> Ellis noted in his history of the party that its correspondence at this time owed much to "Latham's clarity of style and forceful expression."<sup>148</sup> This included drafting in January 1923 the party's terms for a coalition, which insisted on the removal of Hughes from the ministry. Latham only joined the Nationalists in November 1925 and became Attorney-General the following month. He continued to advise on the

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<sup>144</sup> Graham, *ibid.*, pp. 179, 215.

<sup>145</sup> From Page's 'Memorandum for Nationalist Party Managers', 24 January 1923, reproduced in *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 464.

<sup>146</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-9.

<sup>147</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 114

<sup>148</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

constitutional dimensions of new states, not to mention serving as Opposition leader in 1929-31 and subsequently as Chief Justice of the High Court. Page negotiated for a coalition in the face of colleagues' fears of absorption by the Nationalists. After Hughes conceded his resignation, Page proceeded to deal directly with Bruce, the start of a working relationship that became central to Page's career.<sup>149</sup> Bruce had only been a minister since December 1921 when he was unexpectedly appointed Treasurer. Prior to entering parliament he was managing director of a Melbourne importing firm. As a wounded veteran – of the British army at Gallipoli – he made such an impression at recruitment meetings that the Nationalists invited him to stand for Flinders. It transpired that one of Bruce's major strengths was the contrast that his measured, stately demeanour presented to Hughes' intensity and abrasiveness. The broad compatibility of Bruce's and Page's views on national development was also to be important, as detailed in chapter four.

Over 5-6 February 1923, the two leaders reached agreement on a coalition that become known as the Bruce-Page government. The Country Party caucus belatedly met three days later, and Page came under attack for not consulting it earlier. Two members later told the House that they had not wanted a coalition, but the parliamentary party satisfied itself with a motion on maintaining its identity.<sup>150</sup> Party opposition to a coalition reflected fear of suffering a loss of autonomy, as had some state parties such as in Queensland.<sup>151</sup> Just fourteen months earlier, the Progressive Party in New South Wales had split over the issue of coalition with the state Nationalists. But serious protest was mainly confined to the resolutely nonaligned VFU.<sup>152</sup> Page countered that the terms of the coalition clearly provided for a distinct Country Party – indeed, this was their first article. It was clear Page had secured a very good deal indeed, which gave the Country Party five out of eleven ministerial positions. As Graham later wrote, “nothing showed his skill in leadership as much as his efforts, in the months following the formation of the coalition, to persuade the Country Party

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<sup>149</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, pp. 114-27; Ellis, *ibid.*, pp. 97-8, 130.

<sup>150</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 193-4.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 110-14, 194; Davey, *Ninety Not Out, op. cit.*, pp. 28-9.

movement to accept it.”<sup>153</sup> Caucus and its attendant farmers’ organisations effectively gave Page a clear hand to run high strategy and policy. This forging of the coalition is further affirmation of Page’s resolve to achieve substantial change, not just to lead a marginal protest party. “We were determined to use our opportunities to the full,” he later said.<sup>154</sup> As it became clear that the coalition constituted a balanced formula for maintaining the Country Party’s independence while giving it great political influence, state country parties began exploring coalitions of their own, notably the New South Wales Progressives. Victoria remained the exception, where VFU radicals challenged the coalition concept for years to come.<sup>155</sup>

Transition to a Bruce-Page coalition proceeded smoothly. Page’s choice of Treasury for himself probably reflected the priority the party gave to reining in public expenditure (and was one of the portfolios he sought for his party when Hughes mooted a coalition fifteen months earlier.<sup>156</sup>) In his first speech to the House as Treasurer, he stressed the need for the government “by its handling of the finances and by its general administration...to improve the public credit in order to permit of the conversion on the best possible basis for Australia of the huge war loans that are to fall due during the ordinary life of this parliament.”<sup>157</sup>



*Figure 6: the first Bruce-Page ministry at its swearing-in ceremony, 1923: standing (left to right); W.G. Gibson, Percy Stewart, Eric Bowden, Thomas Crawford, R.V. Wilson, L. Atkinson; seated; G. F. Pearce, Bruce, Lord Forster (Governor-General), Page, Littleton Groom. (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-136658156>).*

<sup>153</sup> Graham, *ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>154</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, p. 129.

<sup>155</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

<sup>156</sup> Davey, *Ninety Not Out, op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>157</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 8 March 1923, p. 243.

Page's role over the next six and a half years as Treasurer and *de facto* Deputy Prime Minister gave him a say in most major decisions of the Bruce-Page government. His conventional budgetary responsibilities were among the least distinctive of his achievements. There was little sense of fiscal policy during this period. Governments did not feel that they could readily reduce unemployment, and public expectations were correspondingly limited. Page's budget speeches were "more like a Chairman's address to the annual meeting of a large public company than the nation's principal document on economic policy."<sup>158</sup> John Nethercote has nonetheless noted that Page was the first Commonwealth Treasurer to introduce budgets on a regular basis and early in the financial year, and also improved the form of budget papers.<sup>159</sup> Page himself said that previously budget items had been largely lumped together into uninformative totals, with the result that "public criticisms tended to be directed towards the total amount rather than to the diverse items", which was "not conducive to intelligent public surveillance of government expenditures."<sup>160</sup>

Page's first budgets reflected his oft-stated commitment to smaller government and relief from taxes, especially for primary producers. (In 1921 he had called deficit budgeting "a Rake's Progress").<sup>161</sup> They provided for reductions to land and company taxes, a single collecting agency for Commonwealth and state income taxes, a higher income tax exemption level, an expanded averaging system for income tax on primary producers (helping them manage profit and loss fluctuations), widened deductions for farm improvements and pest control, reduced postage charges and the establishment of an investment fund to finance the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR, created in 1926 to replace the ineffective Institute of Science and Industry).<sup>162</sup> In his first budget speech as Treasurer he added the need for a national insurance scheme when he described existing welfare as failing to "remove that sense of

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<sup>158</sup> Boris Schedvin, *Australia and the Great Depression: A Study of Economic Development and Policy in the 1920s and 1930s*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1970, p. 88. Schedvin was writing at the high point of Keynesianism.

<sup>159</sup> J.R. Nethercote, 'Liberalism, Nationalism and Coalition 1910-29', in J.R. Nethercote (ed.), *Liberalism and the Australian Federation*, The Federation Press, Leichhardt, 2001, p. 130.

<sup>160</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

<sup>161</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104-5, 117-8.

cruel insecurity which haunts great masses of our people through the whole of their life — the fear that accident or temporary sickness may break up their home, the continual fear of unemployment due to causes entirely beyond their control, and finally the fear of a destitute old age after a life of toil."<sup>163</sup> National insurance was to feature later in Page's parliamentary career, at the end of both the Bruce-Page and the Lyons governments.

Page drew on his policy visions to become the first Commonwealth Treasurer to explore the wider possibilities of this office. One important initiative was banking reform to work towards creation of a central bank "with power to control and save shaky banks and restore them to solvency without destruction of their customers", an echo of Page's childhood experience of the 1893 bank smash.<sup>164</sup> In his October 1922 election policy speech he had spoken of creating an independent board for the Commonwealth Bank that would reorient it towards supporting national development, especially rural projects including hydroelectricity and the provision of rural credits to primary producers.<sup>165</sup> Legislation in 1924 placed the Commonwealth Bank under such a board and empowered it to fix and publish its discount rate. This was just a first step towards a central bank, especially as it was not made a compulsory depositor bank for private institutions. After a study trip to North America in 1925, Page created a rural credits department within the Commonwealth Bank to provide low interest loans to primary producers on the security of their produce.<sup>166</sup> Page remained an advocate of an independent Commonwealth Bank, later opposing the Labor Treasurer Theodore's 1931 legislation to assert political control over the Bank by selling off its gold reserve to meet government debts.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 26 July 1923, p. 1653.

<sup>164</sup> 'Australian Country Party Complimentary Dinner to Sir Earle Page', *op. cit.*

<sup>165</sup> See *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 October 1922, pp. 9-10.

<sup>166</sup> Page's *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry, *op. cit.*; see also Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 145-7.

<sup>167</sup> Schedvin, *op. cit.*, p. 238. The bill failed in the Senate. Important as Page's measures were, a central banking role for the Commonwealth Bank was only effectively assumed during World War Two, and was shifted to the new Reserve Bank of Australia in 1960.

For all the rural development rhetoric that characterised the Bruce-Page years, the Country Party from the outset found it politically difficult to cut tariffs that increased the costs of manufactures used by farmers. Various marketing crises and a reluctant acceptance that tariffs were here to stay led the Bruce-Page government to implement an array of subsidies and pricing schemes for rural producers. Despite his reservations about industry support by government, Page famously said that primary producers needed to “get into the vicious circle themselves” and seek direct protection. It is less well-known that in the 1924 speech in which he appears to have first used this phrase before a major audience he also spoke at length about other means of aiding primary producers, including better marketing of exports, collaboration to end “suicidal competition” on export markets, new power sources and standardising manufacturing to reduce costs.<sup>168</sup> The political benefits of “protection all round”, as it became known, were accepted as a means of reconciling urban and rural interests at a time that Country Party support was essential to the government’s survival. Over 1923-24 new legislation provided for dairy produce and dried fruit export control boards made up of government nominees and growers’ representatives, government-arranged bank advances to dried fruit growers, an Australian Meat Council, bounties on beef and cattle exports, government guarantee of bank advances to voluntary wheat pools, and for a specific advance to the Tasmanian hop growers pool.<sup>169</sup>

One ALP Senator observed of all this that “having a medical man in the ministry, the government is dealing out small doses of socialism – say a half-teaspoonful every twenty-four hours.” Country Party members admitted a certain parallel, but rationalised such orderly marketing as a regrettable necessity that compensated for the tariffs and arbitration that served urban interests. Even Stewart referred to how “we are compelled to accept the

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<sup>168</sup> Quoted in Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 115. Page was speaking at the annual conference of the New South Wales FSA; for a full text of his speech see *The Land*, 22 August 1924, pp. 2-4. Another example of Page referring to the “vicious circle” was before a New South Wales FSA audience, reported in the *Sydney Sun*, 7 August 1927, p. 5.

<sup>169</sup> Geoffrey Sawer, *Australian Federal Politics and Law 1901-1929*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, 1956, pp. 228-9; Sinclair, *The Process of Economic Development in Australia*, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

results of their system and hop into the ring to secure our share along with the rest.”<sup>170</sup> But this public-private symbiosis was predicated on private ownership of the means of production: Page remained a stalwart opponent of state enterprises and the nationalisation of industry.

Beyond his direct responsibilities as Treasurer and involvement in orderly marketing, Page used his political status in the coalition to pursue his more personal vision of the nation. How he asserted himself on other such policy fronts during the Bruce-Page government forms the focus of the remainder of this chapter and of the three that follow it.

### **The Bruce-Page government signals its intentions: Commonwealth-state co-operation**

Page took his place in the new Bruce-Page ministry in February 1923 determined to reform the federal system and the Constitution. As he wrote in an early draft of his memoirs:

In the first decade [after Federation] parliamentary activity was largely devoted to the formal initiation of the constitutional provisions by the establishment of the practical framework. In the second ten years parliament, dominated by the necessities of war, operated for the most significant period under the defence powers of the Constitution in the process of which significant weaknesses were revealed by experience. It therefore fell to the parliament in the third decade to profit from the experience of the previous periods and to apply the lessons learned in an effort to make the Constitution work in the manner visualised by the architects of the Federal system.<sup>171</sup>

Bruce and Page were Australia’s first national leaders to grapple comprehensively with co-ordinating policy with the states and the related correction of unbalanced fiscal relations. Their efforts reflect the tensions

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<sup>170</sup> Both quotes from Sawyer, *ibid.*, p. 233. The ALP senator was Albert Gardiner.

<sup>171</sup> Draft for *Truant Surgeon*, EPP, folder 1860. A similar sentiment appeared in the published version of *Truant Surgeon*, but was less eloquently worded: in the Great War “Australian Government began to function more and more as a unitary system”, but “in the post-war years the anomalies and weaknesses that had developed were thrown into stark relief, but the Hughes Government showed neither enthusiasm nor inclination to attack the problem at root”; see Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

arising from an inelastic constitution that inspires developmentalist policy-makers to try either to change it or manoeuvre around it. In doing so, Page worked under his Prime Minister's leadership, but still distinguished himself as a determined strategist with a discernible agenda of his own. He was to learn wider lessons from his experience that he applied to many later ventures into co-operative federalism and economic planning.

Page, a self-declared "lifelong advocate of constitutional reform," once claimed to have also been "spurred into Federal politics by my interest in the principles of Federation", including his belief that such issues as electrification and transport could only be "dealt with on a Federal or interstate level, and by a process of constructive national thinking."<sup>172</sup> Federal ideas have deep roots in Australia's past but as scholars of federalism have long observed, the Commonwealth-state balance has never been settled.<sup>173</sup> Page entered this debate as the leading proponent of the view that the federal system and the Constitution on which it was based were barriers to national development and so needed to be reformed. This led him as Treasurer to pursue co-operative federalism, with the Commonwealth leading the development of national policies in collaboration the states, but using its fiscal and other powers to remain firmly dominant.

Page considered himself a committed federalist. He described the classic series of American essays on constitutional federalism *The Federalist Papers* as his "constant companion" (and saw it as pointing to a model of a united British Empire that drew on federal principles).<sup>174</sup> Here he was reflecting a long tradition of what Brian Galligan describes as a "compound republic", which "added the natural advantages of largeness to the local advantages of smallness." The effective dual citizenship that this provides of respective states and of the nation helps explain federalism's strength in Australia.<sup>175</sup> That

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<sup>172</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 8 March 1944, p. 1071; also Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-9.

<sup>173</sup> See for example A.J. Brown, 'Federalism, Regionalism and the Reshaping of Australian Governance', in Brown and Bellamy, *op. cit.*, pp.11-32.

<sup>174</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

<sup>175</sup> Brian Galligan, *A Federal Republic: Australia's Constitutional System of Government*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1995, pp. 39, 43, 53.

federalism made the Australian nation possible by reconciling local loyalties with nationalism makes it a vital concept in Australian history, one that is illuminated by Page's policy campaigns.

Much of the secondary material on the history of Australian federalism consists of detailed technical accounts of Commonwealth-state financial relations, with only fleeting references to competing ideas and political drivers. Co-operative federalism appears frequently as a broad term encompassing various means by which Commonwealth and state governments jointly managed overlapping interests. In 1952 the political scientist S.R. Davis observed that Australia's rich history of such co-operation attracted less scholarly interest than had inter-governmental conflict.<sup>176</sup> This has not greatly changed. W.G. McMinn added that the various co-operative mechanisms that appeared over time became important means of effectively limiting the states' power and increasing that of the Commonwealth. He listed four types of co-operation: use of state or Commonwealth bodies to implement the other's programs; joint agencies such as the River Murray Commission; the pooling of legislation, such as to create a national aviation regime; and more informal executive co-operation through bodies such as the Australian Agricultural Council.<sup>177</sup>

Starting in the Bruce-Page years, Page was to play a major role in the development of such co-operative mechanisms. The Constitution's lack of provision for collaboration between the two main levels of government left a gap that he sought to fill by institutionalising means by which they could together develop national policies – effectively forms of nationwide planning. This was also his way of attempting to drive policy fields over which the Commonwealth lacked constitutional authority. An outline of early measures to encourage inter-governmental co-operation reads like a roll-call of initiatives that he either led or contributed significantly to, most famously the Financial Agreement of 1927 that realigned Commonwealth-state financial

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<sup>176</sup> The “unmistakable trend in Australian government is in the direction of extensive inter-governmental co-operation and co-ordination under the impetus and leadership of the Commonwealth”, he wrote, yet “there is no systematic account of it”; S.R. Davis, ‘Co-operative Federalism in Retrospect’, *Historical Studies* vol. 5, no. 19, 1952, p. 215.

<sup>177</sup> McMinn, *op. cit.*, pp. 191-4.

relations and gave the Loan Council binding status. Page had a major hand in negotiating this arrangement, a career highlight which influenced his wider approach to federalism and constitutional reform. More specialised co-operative bodies also appeared under the Bruce-Page government and in following years, covering fields as diverse as food and drug standards, immigration, road construction and primary produce marketing.

An important contextual consideration here is that despite the difficulty of amending the Constitution, during Page's career it was decidedly not a revered document. Throughout his Bruce-Page heyday it still lacked any claim to have been especially successful by virtue of longevity. It attracted strident criticism for not preventing vertical fiscal imbalance, which Page saw as working against the responsible use of public funds by its separation of revenue-raising from expenditure. He had no qualms about correcting this and other anomalies, thereby "making the constitutions of our states and Commonwealth our servants and not our masters."<sup>178</sup> To him, the Commonwealth Constitution was at once a feckless impediment to progress and a potential basis for enshrining his policies. Either way, he frequently found himself pushing against what was already part of the received wisdom of Australian governance – that the wording of the Constitution is very hard indeed to change.

Also significant was the strength of what the political scientist Hugh Emy called "the federal bargain" – Australia's "*sine qua non* of political co-operation and even of political integration."<sup>179</sup> This holds that all Australian governments are formally equal in status and sovereign in nature, and has proved highly resistant to unilateral challenge. Instances of the Commonwealth and the states working together, such as on orderly marketing, were thus necessary political accommodations, not the results of preference.<sup>180</sup> Page was one of the first prominent political figures outside the ALP to challenge openly this federal bargain. Despite his protestations to the contrary, Page was never a true federalist who equally respected both tiers of government. As he had

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<sup>178</sup> Speech 6 January 1927 to the Constitutional Club, Brisbane, EPP, folder 417.

<sup>179</sup> Hugh Emy, *The Politics of Australian Democracy: Fundamentals in Dispute*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, second edition, 1978 (first published 1974), p. 72.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.78-81.

clearly stated in 1917, the national government should be dominant in setting policy. He approached federalism as at best a means of combining nationally determined policy settings with local expertise in implementation. This tension between the rational importance he attached to strong central government and his emotional attachment to regionalism persisted throughout his long engagement with issues of federalism.

Page's national perspective was made stridently clear in his early public statements as Treasurer, no doubt to the unease of his new state confreres. Just five months after becoming Treasurer, he told the new state convention in Rockhampton that as Federation had failed there was a need for an "intense NATIONAL FEELING that will over-ride all parochial considerations, disregard the existence of imaginary state boundaries, and prevent the continuation of that system of pitting one capital city against another, which has proved so detrimental to the BALANCED AND PROPORTIONATE DEVELOPMENT of Australia as a whole."<sup>181</sup> Yet most published assessments of Page underplay this commitment to strong national government via such means as collaboration with the states and instead focus in isolation on his engagement with new statism. Geoffrey Sawer very plausibly suggested that most Country Party MPs opposed Page's proposed constitutional convention as they felt that what he really wanted was greater Commonwealth powers. Sawer and A.J. Brown are among the few historians to have concluded that Page was essentially a centralist.<sup>182</sup>

In office, just a few years after his 1917 call to scrap entirely the existing constitution, Page found himself advocating co-operation between the states and the Commonwealth. The Bruce-Page government tried to pioneer a move away from change forced by High Court decision and the Commonwealth's fiscal power by offering a voluntary alternative based on Commonwealth-led co-operative federalism. This broadly matched Page's developing ideas on

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<sup>181</sup> 'New States – Why They are Necessary in Australia – Speech by Dr Earle Page', *op. cit.*, p. 2; Page's own capitalisations in this published version of his speech.

<sup>182</sup> Sawer, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

unification and national approaches to policy, and was one of the reasons why he and Bruce worked well together.

Debate on Commonwealth-state relations during the Bruce-Page years initially centred on the fiscal balance. The Commonwealth's wartime introduction of its own direct taxation resulted in the states' collective share of all government revenue tumbling from 93 per cent in 1901-02 to 55 per cent in 1918-19.<sup>183</sup> Commonwealth expenditure declined after the war, and many federal parliamentarians advocated eliminating the heightened vertical fiscal imbalance that resulted by ending the per capita grants still being made to the states. Bruce and Page both strongly ascribed to the widespread view that such imbalance weakened accountability and democratic controls over all governments concerned.<sup>184</sup> Proposals to reform fiscal relations also included a co-operative council that would reduce the cost of loans by co-ordinating borrowing by both levels of government. The Commonwealth had long favoured a measure along these lines and made it a condition of related proposals that it take over state debts. At the Premiers' Conference of April-May 1908 Deakin had proposed a Finance Council under which the Commonwealth would arrange all loans, acquire the states' debts and establish a debt sinking fund – all foreshadowing what Bruce and Page later implemented.<sup>185</sup> The states were conflicted between being attracted to offloading their debts and their (well-founded) suspicion that co-ordinated borrowing would increase Commonwealth dominance.<sup>186</sup>

The case for co-ordinated borrowing grew after the advent of peace in 1918. Australian governments resumed competing for loans locally and internationally, the Commonwealth sought to convert old loans into new obligations as a means of servicing war debt, and the states wanted to finance

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<sup>183</sup> Nicholas Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 409.

<sup>184</sup> Russell Matthews, *Revenue Sharing in Federal Systems*, Centre for Research on Federal Financial Relations, Australian National University, Canberra, 1980, p. 11.

<sup>185</sup> R.S. Gilbert, *The Australian Loan Council in Federal Fiscal Adjustments, 1890-1965*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1973, p. 37. S.R. Davis records a Loan Council as being proposed as early as 1903; see S.R. Davis, 'A Unique Federal Institution', *University of Western Australia Annual Law Review*, December 1952, p. 355.

<sup>186</sup> R.L. Mathews and W.R.C. Jay, *Federal Finance: Intergovernmental Financial Relations in Australia since Federation*, Thomas Nelson (Australia), Melbourne, 1972, p. 105.

soldier settlement and public works. Australia's net external debt continued to rise, reaching £419 million in mid-1923 and £570 million in mid-1928, with the new debt largely related to rural development.<sup>187</sup> The states were continually in deficit, as the real value of their per capita grants had been eroded by wartime inflation.<sup>188</sup> The 1920-23 Royal Commission on Taxation recommended ending the per capita grants and all income tax being collected by the Commonwealth.<sup>189</sup>

Leadership in intergovernmental co-operation, financial or otherwise, had by the early 1920s shifted to the Commonwealth. This was driven by the imperatives of the war and the continuing centralism of Prime Minister Hughes, hence for example his government taking the initiative in convening the 1919 Premiers' Conference.<sup>190</sup> Emphasis was moving from distinguishing between levels of government by policy area to a distinction based instead on different organisational functions in dealing with shared issues. The Commonwealth began to assume a role as a central planner, especially of economic policy, with state governments handling implementation.

The new Bruce-Page government almost at once sought to resolve these issues of federal finance and policy co-operation by asserting a leading role for the Commonwealth. Bruce led and Page provided crucially important encouragement and support. These efforts, says A.J. Brown, resulted in "Australia's first real system of co-operative intergovernmental relations."<sup>191</sup> The 1922 Premiers' Conference, the last presided over by Hughes, had a comparatively limited agenda of proposed co-operation in uniform railway gauges (even then a decades-old issue), export promotion, immigration and land settlement. The May 1923 Conference presided over by Bruce and Page was very different indeed.

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<sup>187</sup> Yule in Connor, Stanley and Yule, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102, 105-6; and Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

<sup>189</sup> R.C. Gates, 'The Search for a State Growth Tax', in R.L. Matthews, (ed.), *Intergovernmental Relations in Australia*, Angus and Robertson, Cremorne, 1974, pp. 165-6.

<sup>190</sup> Davis, 'Co-operative Federalism in Retrospect', *op. cit.*, p. 221.

<sup>191</sup> Brown, 'Subsidiarity or Subterfuge?', *op. cit.*, p. 37.

Its “number of proposals to secure national co-operation”, as Page rather casually described them in his memoirs, amounted to an attempt to comprehensively shape the Australian federation in a way compatible with what he had called for in 1917.<sup>192</sup> The Premiers were presented with an unprecedentedly ambitious agenda for Commonwealth-led policy co-ordination in the form of a list of twenty-five major issues and an accompanying paper on each. This included the co-ordination of government borrowing; the application of science to industry, notably hydropower; Commonwealth grants to the states for main road development; uniform railway gauges for the Port Augusta to Hay and Kyogle to Brisbane lines; rationalisation of industrial relations powers; joint electoral rolls; co-ordination of the collection of statistics; and (as detailed in chapter three) the planning and standardisation of electricity generation.<sup>193</sup> The Commonwealth also proposed an Australia-wide stocktake of economic resources to assess the capital and labour needed for “successful development.”<sup>194</sup> It was clear that this was a very different Commonwealth government indeed, one set on enlisting the states in a radical rationalisation of the federation in the interests of nationally-managed economic development. It saw no place for intergovernmental duplication and had a strong sense of national efficiency as both means and end.

The May 1923 Premiers’ Conference also constituted the first attempt by the Bruce-Page government to overhaul Commonwealth-state financial relations. Bruce, in opening the Conference, signalled that this was the foremost issue and led for the Commonwealth throughout the ensuing conference debate. He described existing duplication between the levels of government and double taxation as intolerable, “the gravest inconvenience to taxpayers.” Page spoke late in proceedings, when his grasp of the proposed reforms – thorough and confident, despite his lack of ministerial experience – drew him into playing the leading role in sparring with the states on important details.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>193</sup> A full set of agenda papers for this ‘Conference Between Commonwealth and State Ministers’ is at EPP, folder 1730; reports of proceedings are at folder 2663 part II. See also accounts of the conference in the *Argus*, 24, 28, 29 and 30 May 1923.

<sup>194</sup> Michael Roe, *Australia, Britain, and Migration 1915-1940: A Study of Desperate Hopes*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 49.

<sup>195</sup> *Argus*, 26 May 1923, pp. 9, 21-2.

Negotiations soon became intense and complex. Bruce and Page proposed to limit Commonwealth income tax to incomes of over £2,000 per annum in exchange for the abolition of the per capita grants.<sup>196</sup> Although the states agreed that fiscal relations were out of kilter, they objected to this implied focusing of their own taxes on lower income earners. They countered that the Commonwealth should instead withdraw from income tax altogether, and the states make compensating grants of their own to the Commonwealth – which Bruce and Page promptly declined because of continuing defence obligations. The Commonwealth's final offer, to limit its direct tax to company tax while also abolishing the per capita payments, narrowly failed due to rejection by New South Wales. The Premiers (except the Western Australian Premier) accepted only the joint collection by the states of Commonwealth and state taxes.<sup>197</sup>

More significant was that the states agreed at this 1923 Conference to create a Loan Council, albeit a voluntary one limited to seeking agreement on the timing and terms of loans. The raising of loans remained with each government, including decisions on amounts.<sup>198</sup> (New South Wales withdrew from this Loan Council when Jack Lang became Premier in 1925, but re-joined in December 1927 following his defeat). This was the first practical step towards the 1927 Financial Agreement and the recasting of the Loan Council as a more powerful entity that was to influence lastingly Page's conception of co-operative federalism.

Page's sudden rise in national politics had drawn upon a matrix of issues: a civic element of organised protest via the early Country Party and new statism; a spatial element of resentment based on distance from big cities and demand for equal entitlement; and a rural element that wanted society decentralised into more socially functional communities. Despite his idiosyncratic and striving nature, Page felt a ready sense of ease in the new Bruce-Page government, exemplified by his enthusiasm for its early efforts to realign the federation. He

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<sup>196</sup> Mathews and Jay, *op. cit.*, p. 119, say this was first proposed by Bruce and Page at a Treasurer's Conference: however, R.S. Gilbert, historian of the Loan Council, and Page himself both state it was at this Premiers' Conference; see Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 75, and Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, p. 157.

<sup>197</sup> Mathews and Jay, *ibid.*, p. 119; Page, *ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>198</sup> Mathews and Jay, *ibid.*, p. 106.

also quickly established himself as a forceful policy leader within a still formative parliamentary Country Party made up of colleagues who by contrast were only beginning to feel their way on issues. This all left him in a strong position to pursue his more personal policy agenda, the focus of the next chapter.

### **CHAPTER 3 – TREASURER PAGE PURSUES HIS POLICY VISION: HYDROELECTRICITY, NEW STATES AND RURAL ROADS**

Page joined the Bruce-Page government in February 1923 with characteristic self-assuredness. The press quickly sensed a very singular Commonwealth minister of state. Journalists were bemused by his continuing to practice as a surgeon: just three months after being sworn in as Treasurer, Page was reported to have operated on his brother James.<sup>1</sup> Ethel Page also began to make a name for herself, telling the Women's Section of the VFU that "country women's organisations without politics...remind me of those rivers in Central Australia which...lose themselves here, there and everywhere in the sands of the desert."<sup>2</sup>

Page signalled his special sense of purpose by using his status as a senior minister to pursue personal visions in three important policy areas – hydroelectricity, new states and rural roads. In each, his pursuit of change well beyond what was sought by most other rural-based civic movements and advocates, including those in his own Country Party, made him a major influence on what policy ideas were current. The perception that the early Country Party was more "a pressure group concerned wholly and solely with the wallets of rural producers" than a true political party is an overstatement, but nonetheless has a degree of validity: its leader, however, was far broader indeed.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Page's vision of hydroelectricity**

Geoff Page wrote in his poem 'The River' of his grandfather Earle "dreaming of the Gorge," including of how "New wires are swooping over the farms/ the sixty watt bulb with conical shade/ a kind of enlightenment/ equal to Voltaire's."<sup>4</sup> Electrification was the most pronounced manifestation of Earle Page's faith in

<sup>1</sup> *Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder*, 11 May 1923, p. 2. James was then headmaster of a public school near Maitland.

<sup>2</sup> *Farmers' Advocate*, 28 September 1923, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Quote from L.L. Robson, *Australia in the Nineteen Twenties: Commentary and Documents*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1980, p. 70.

<sup>4</sup> Geoff Page, 'The River', *Collected Lives*, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1986, pp. 45-58.

technology. This “potent decentraliser” enlivened his vision of a regionalised and decentralised nation. He championed hydroelectricity above other forms of power generation as it could be based on the harnessing of river systems by regional authorities. Hydroelectricity also had an emotional resonance for Page as it drew on his devotion to his home region. Damming The Gorge section of the Clarence River was to be the first step in a nationwide harnessing of Australia’s rivers. His inspiration quite literally ran past his own front yard at Heifer Station.

Electrification also neatly bookends Page’s career. It provided a focus for his early activism in Grafton and was his foremost cause after he left the federal ministry in early 1956. Page was one of a number of prominent Australians who in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries looked overseas for ideas about development, especially in the United States. Most famously, Alfred Deakin studied irrigation in California and India: Page’s interest in hydroelectricity was heightened by his trips to New Zealand in 1910 and to North America in 1917. He became the foremost Australian manifestation of the major technological cultural phenomenon of this time: faith in the socially transformative power of electricity, or “electrical triumphalism.”<sup>5</sup>

Page’s campaign to dam the Clarence is also a good indicator of his thought processes: doggedness, commitment to place and a tendency to focus on a single developmental trigger from which much else would undoubtedly flow. He succeeded against professional doubts and political indifference in having hydroelectricity debated from the 1910s up to the late 1950s. He differed from such other Australian hydroelectric enthusiasts as the engineers Corin and John Bradfield by his pronounced interest in the social benefits of electrification. Also, Page only rarely used the exultant rhetoric of American and European visionaries or their metaphors of a higher cause of conquering

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<sup>5</sup> The term is used by Bill Luckin in *Questions of Power: Electricity and Environment in Inter-War Britain*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1990, pp. 1-22.

nature.<sup>6</sup> He was more focussed on the immediate practical benefits he foresaw by using electrification to power his regionalist and decentralist agenda.

Hydroelectricity was linked to many specific elements of Page's approach to economic and social development – local autonomy, transformative technologies, planning, co-operative federalism, franchises for foreign investors and enshrinement in the Constitution. His focus on electricity rather than irrigation or flood control set him apart from many other Australian hydroengineering advocates. Although these latter applications were not unimportant to him, hailing as he did from a flood-prone region, Page's main interest in "water conservation" was hydroelectricity's economic and social potential. This included but extended well beyond using electrification to ease the harshness of rural life, a common policy aspiration in Australia and elsewhere. (One of Franklin D. Roosevelt's most important New Deal agencies was the Rural Electrification Administration). Page saw electrification as crucially important to decentralised national development by enabling "reproductive" investment in rural-based industries and supporting social amenities.

Electrification and hydroelectricity are also evidence of Page's persistent habit of either ignoring cautious technical advice that deigned to thwart his goals, or liberally interpreting it as affirming them. This again marks him as more an instinctive thinker than the consummate rationalist he took himself to be. Tracing Page's electrification campaigns also helps build a picture of how he operated at different times. In the 1910s his appeals to local governments and state ministers were heavily influenced by exemplars in North America and New Zealand. But in the 1920s he worked through the Commonwealth government of which he was a senior member and, late in the decade, a robustly independent Development and Migration Commission that he expected to validate his vision of the Clarence Valley.

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<sup>6</sup> Nye called this "an essentially religious feeling" that sought "to reinvest the landscape and the works of man with transcendent significance"; Nye, *op. cit.*, p. xiii. Blackbourn describes how in Germany the harnessing of rivers often acquired wider symbolic meaning, including the heroic conquest of nature; Blackbourn, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-5, 18.

Assessing Page's attachment to electrification necessitates a social constructivist approach that stresses how he envisaged technology interacting with society and politics, not a more limited focus on the initial development of new technology.<sup>7</sup> Although he first became interested in hydroelectricity in the early 1910s, his ideas about its application only reached a settled form a decade later, after he had successfully led local governments to establish a power station on the Nymboida River. In an April 1922 article in the *Daily Examiner* entitled 'Cheap Power – Australia's Greatest Need', Page neatly summarised his conclusions on the centrality of electrification to development and modernity itself:

In the economy of the world today the most marked characteristic is the admission of the necessity for cheap power. It is everywhere recognised that progress and development are largely dependent upon a constant and adequate supply that will be always available, widely distributed and easily applied. The ideal would be a power available in every home, on every farm and in every factory, in the country not less than the town, and supplied at a price within the reach of all.

Electricity, he concluded, was the best way to achieve this, as it could be widely distributed, stored and "easily applied to everyday use." Indeed, electricity consumption was a strong indicator of a nation's "standard of comfort if not of civilisation", by which benchmark "Australia occupies a position with the most lowly civilised races."<sup>8</sup> One of the main barriers was centralisation. In 1925 he complained that the "excessive centralisation of industry" was largely due to state government control of power production and neglect of water power. State governments had been "like the wolf in the fable of the wolf and the lamb – they have neither used the water nor allowed others [to] use it for power development."<sup>9</sup> Page's vision was to use electricity as a "potent decentraliser"

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<sup>7</sup> Bijker, Hughes and Pinch aptly refer to the "seamless web" of society and technology; see Wiebe E. Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes, and Trevor Pinch (eds.), *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Direction in the Sociology and History of Technology*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1987, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Daily Examiner* 14 April 1922, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> 'Power Production', 1925, EPP, folder 2088; unsigned but its format and characteristic references to the Clarence River, North American exemplars and the "excessive centralisation" of industry indicate that it was prepared by Page and apparently meant for Cabinet. Undated, but refers to the World Power Conference of 1924 as held "last year."

to help create a more productive and united Australia that was decentralised yet efficient, ordered yet egalitarian.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Nymboida and Jackadgery: Page and regional hydroelectricity**

During his 1917 travels in North America, Page was greatly impressed by how electrification was managed in Ontario and British Columbia.<sup>11</sup> The 1919 booklet he produced through the North Coast Development League, entitled *The Clarence Gorge Hydro-Electric Scheme*, presented the Ontario Hydro-Electric Power Commission as a model for regional control of power production. The Commission, Page reported, was successfully managed by local governments, made good use of private contractors by issuing debentures backed by the provincial government, and encouraged electricity use by keeping charges to manufacturers and farmers low.<sup>12</sup> These became features of his later hydroelectric proselytizing and lifelong admiration of Canada.

Page particularly seized upon the Ontario Commission as evidence of the transformative power of regionalism. He claimed that it had “secured intelligent and harmonious co-operation among local bodies” and “developed a national outlook throughout the whole area, thus bound together by the ties of common interest.”<sup>13</sup> Page felt “a pang when one contrasts the more favourable conditions of our climate” with “our entire failure to manufacture our own necessities, quite apart from providing munitions or manufactures and the lack of the comforts of life that prevails here.”<sup>14</sup>

Once home, Page continued to seek lessons from overseas. He studied closely, for example, a January 1918 article in the *New Zealand Journal of Science and Technology* on the economics of electrification, heavily underlining passages on how widely distributed power could help establish new

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<sup>10</sup> Notes for speech ‘Electrical Standards’, no date but c. 1925, EPP, folder 1053.

<sup>11</sup> Ellis, ‘The Story of Nymboida, notes for Sir Earle Page,’ *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> *The Clarence Gorge Hydro-Electric Scheme: Harnessing 100,000 Horse-Power*, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-43.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

industries.<sup>15</sup> His interest was reinforced by very visible rapid development in the use of electricity in Australia. The decade after 1919 saw a fourfold increase in Australian electricity consumption, faster than most other countries (but similar to Canada). By 1927, Australia's electricity consumption of about 300 kWh per head was half as big again as Britain's.<sup>16</sup> In 1921 the State Electricity Commission (SEC) of Victoria became mainland Australia's first statewide electricity public utility. Following a vociferous technical debate over the relative merits of brown coal and hydroelectricity, it proceeded to aggressively exploit Gippsland's brown coal reserves.<sup>17</sup> There was also a jump in the local manufacture of electrical goods, albeit mostly consumer items produced by foreign subsidiaries while more complex manufactures were usually imported. But electrification remained heavily orientated to meeting urban rather than rural demand, much of which was made possible by British loans to state governments.<sup>18</sup>

Page in the early 1920s drew on the status of office, his local prestige as the Clarence River region's most famed citizen and the results of his travels to promote three closely related strategies for electrification – the harnessing of the Clarence River system as the first of a series of regional initiatives across the entire nation; the nationwide planning of power utilisation by a national commission that would begin its task by surveying Australia's water resources; and the related standardisation of the means of electricity production and distribution. His first attempt at harnessing the Clarence system, the Nymboida River project of 1923, was also his foremost success in implementing a hydroelectric power initiative. Widely considered a triumph at the time, Page saw it as just an encouraging first step for the wider Clarence and the nation.

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<sup>15</sup> E. Parry, 'The Economics of Electric-Power Distribution', *New Zealand Journal of Science and Technology*, January 1918, pp. 49-55. Page's copy is at EPP, folder 1762.

<sup>16</sup> There is some contemporary evidence that Australia lagged behind the US and Canada in the production and industrial use of electricity, but the picture becomes more mixed if European nations are also considered. See H.R. Harper's presidential address of February 1934 to The Institution of Engineers, Australia, EPP, folder 1059.

<sup>17</sup> See Geoffrey Serle, *John Monash: A Biography*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1982, pp. 436-8.

<sup>18</sup> Colin Forster *Industrial Development in Australia 1920-30*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1964, pp. 103-4; Cochrane, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-9.

Page's efforts on the Nymboida drew on the regional control and the low charges that had so impressed him in Canada. Grafton and South Grafton councils had first formally supported harnessing The Gorge in November 1915 following a second report produced by William Corin that same year.<sup>19</sup> After the war, Page as Mayor of South Grafton lobbied councils in the Clarence and Richmond regions, including by convening a meeting early in 1919 to promote Corin's more ambitious plan of December 1918. In August 1921 councils meeting at Grafton formed a committee to press for the creation of a County Council, to which they could assign powers over electricity production approximating those held by the Ontario Commission. The following May the New South Wales local government minister duly proclaimed the Clarence River County Council (CRCC).<sup>20</sup>

This became Page's template for regional electrification in Australia.<sup>21</sup> With the assistance of the Country Party MLA Alf Pollack, Page and the South Grafton Council focussed on pushing for the Nymboida proposal.<sup>22</sup> Page later claimed in notes for his memoirs that the state government passed the necessary legislation then tarried for two years, relenting only after he publicised the delays.<sup>23</sup> A contract was finally let in early 1923 for a power station of 4,800 kW capacity. This was funded under the Migration Agreement with Britain, which provided for joint British-Australian funding of rural development projects that supported emigration from Britain: another idea, as we will see in chapter five, keenly supported by Page. Publicly recognised as the main progenitor of this Nymboida scheme, Treasurer Page was featured on the cover of the

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<sup>19</sup> *The Clarence Gorge Hydro-Electric Scheme: Harnessing 100,000 Horse-Power, op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>20</sup> Ellis, 'The Story of Nymboida, notes for Sir Earle Page', *op. cit.* Elsewhere Page claimed that the creation of the County Council was the responsibility of his Country Party colleagues and state parliamentarians Roy Vincent and Alf Pollack; see the document outlining the history of Page's interaction with the Clarence in EPP, folder 1855, p. 23; undated, but evidently prepared for the drafting of *Truant Surgeon*.

<sup>21</sup> The CRCC and the Richmond River County Council amalgamated in 1952 to form the Northern Rivers County Council, which was later described as occupying "pride of place in rural electrical enterprise" in the state; see Allbut, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>22</sup> Ellis, 'The Story of Nymboida, notes for Sir Earle Page', *op. cit.* Pollack was Page's most valued local lieutenant, and General Secretary of the Northern New South Wales Separation League and of the Joint Electricity Committee of Northern Municipalities and Shires.

<sup>23</sup> EPP, folder 1855; also Ellis, 'The Story of Nymboida, notes for Sir Earle Page,' *ibid.*

printed program for the “switching on” ceremony of 26 November 1924 as “The Father of the Scheme.”<sup>24</sup>

The Nymboida project embodied much of Page’s vision for an electrified nation, especially local management. He often recalled how he and Pollack had “induced nearly sixty Councils to combine for the gradual harnessing of the Clarence waters for power”, providing a “shining example of what can be done with electricity.”<sup>25</sup> One of the most important issues in electricity use is price setting and the impact this has on consumption. Fundamental to electrification, Page-style, was a common flat rate subsidised by the taxpayer (contrary to most tenets of commercial sustainability) to encourage the uptake of electricity in the countryside – as he later said, “our experience of the flat rate at Nymboida has been that the consequent rapid expansion of rural demand makes power cheaper for every user and unthought of use and advantages are continually turning up.”<sup>26</sup> Even before generation commenced, Page announced his hope that the Nymbodia scheme “might prove a turning point in the history of Australia.”<sup>27</sup> On the day of switching on, he assured a conference in Grafton of local governments that “the psychological moment had arrived for the people of the North.” The conference minutes recorded that “while in America he had been struck with the fact that government had been from the bottom up”, it was the case that “the very opposite prevailed in Australia, where government was from an unwieldy top which bore down and crushed the lower controlling bodies.”<sup>28</sup> Page even called his Sydney home Nymboida.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Booklet commemorating the switching-on of the Nymboida, dated 26 November 1924, in EPP, folder 1046. There was a small council-run hydroelectric scheme at Dorrigo shortly before the Nymboida scheme; see the *Daily Examiner*, 25 November 1924, pp. 4, 5, cutting at EPP, folder 1044.

<sup>25</sup> Typed summary of facts and figures on the Clarence, no date but appears to be late 1950s, EPP, folder 2333; *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 14 September 1944, p. 838. In 1944 the Nymboida was still the largest hydroelectric facility on the Australian mainland.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Dr. Earle Page’s Prescription for National Health and Development’, February 1946, EPP, folder 2295.

<sup>27</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 September 1923, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> This and the preceding quote are from ‘Minutes of the Proceedings of the Conference, with other Papers and Information Relative to the Proposed Jackadgery Hydro-Electric Scheme’ at Grafton of ‘The Electricity Committee of Northern Municipalities and Shires’, 26 November 1924, pp. 21, 26, EPP, folder 1046.

<sup>29</sup> Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, Box 7, folder 62.

For all Page's pride, the Nymboida scheme only serviced adjacent shires. He at once sought to expand regionally-based hydroelectricity, starting with a power station at Jackadgery on the Mann River. This briefly had state government support. Two days before the Nymboida commencement, Page led a delegation of local councillors and MPs to Premier George Fuller, who agreed to pay part of the interest bill for Jackadgery and to seek support under the Migration Agreement.<sup>30</sup> Page set out to create a yet larger local government structure as the basis for the regional management of Jackadgery. He exhorted councils to form a North Coast and Tablelands County Council that could manage so big a facility by encompassing Casino, Inverell, Grafton, Byron, Tweed and other local governments.

Page's *Daily Examiner* duly reported that although the total area was enormous, the compactness of settlement within each component district made the proposal "of especial advantage in connection with a scheme for the distribution of electricity" and a distinct prospect for Migration Agreement funding.<sup>31</sup> A much more ambitious project than the Nymboida, Jackadgery soon fell foul of changes of state government in June 1925 from Fuller's Nationalists to Labor under Jack Lang and in October 1927 to T.R. Bavin's Nationalists.<sup>32</sup> Page had great power at the local and Commonwealth levels, but dealing with state governments was a very different matter.

### **Planning the electrification of the nation**

Page also sought to build on the Nymboida success by directing the Bruce-Page government towards planning the electrification of all Australia. The ambitious agenda for national policy co-ordination they presented to the May 1923 Premiers Conference included a plan for national electrification, the first of a long series of Page-inspired overtures to the states to work with the

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Letter by Page to local councils 4 December 1924, EPP folder 2083; note also his speech at Glen Innes of 15 February 1924 on an enlarged County Council, folder 1050; *Daily Examiner*, 5 September 1925, cutting in Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, Box 6, folder 57.

<sup>32</sup> See for example a letter on this from The Port of the Clarence Advisory Board to Premier Bavin 16 February 1928, in NAA, CP 211/2, 34/13, Investigations – New South Wales – Hydro Electric Scheme (Clarence River): 1928.

Commonwealth in shaping the economic and social landscape. But Australia's small population, distances between population centres, and interstate rivalries worked against nationally planned electrification and in favour of the absence of ultimate purpose that Page abhorred.

National organisation and related standardisation were widely recognised as important for electrification. Electrical standardisation was a major issue for the United States electrical industry throughout the 1910s and 1920s as part of a wider standardisation movement across industry. In Britain, it was known that the division of generation between local governments hampered nationwide electrification.<sup>33</sup> In Australia, Page attempted to take the political lead by using his status in the Bruce-Page government as a powerful platform for appeals to the Australian public and state governments, quite unlike his earlier efforts as an alderman. He saw standardisation as leading to lower costs, more reliable services and a national grid that could carry surplus power between local production systems.<sup>34</sup>

Since the Commonwealth lacked a direct constitutional role in power generation, Page added to the Bruce-Page government's wider advocacy of co-operative federalism the Commonwealth-led co-ordination of a national power grid implemented by the states. At the May 1923 Premiers' Conference he exhorted state power ministers to accept this national approach, telling them that the absence of a body akin to the US Federal Power Commission helped explain Australia's backwardness in power production. He proposed a Federal-State Commission that would "determine prospective power needs in Australia over a period of twenty years" and put all electricity production on a planned "co-operative Commonwealth-State basis."<sup>35</sup> The new Commission would lay down common standards for equipment and transmission, and survey the nation's power resources before issuing "a comprehensive power-scheme for the whole of Australia" that identified sites for new power stations. The

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<sup>33</sup> David F. Noble, *America by Design: Science, Technology, and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism*, Knopf, New York, 1977, pp. 78-82; and Leslie Hannah, *Electricity before Nationalisation: A Study of the Development of the Electricity Supply Industry in Britain to 1948*, Macmillan, London, 1979, p. 39.

<sup>34</sup> 'Power Production', *op. cit.*

<sup>35</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

stridency of the language employed in the agenda paper strongly suggests that it was drafted by Page himself: it provocatively concluded that “the only advantage in Australia’s backwardness is that practically a virgin field lies before us for development on the right lines.”<sup>36</sup>

Page during the conference debate at first tried to be tactful, carefully presenting the Clarence as merely one of several potential power centres. But state ministers reacted with hostility to what they saw as an unwarranted intrusion by the Commonwealth. The Victorian minister, Arthur Robinson, quoted his state’s Electricity Commissioners as describing the Commonwealth proposal as “utopian and certainly not within the legitimate range of Federal co-operation for at least another generation”, especially given Australia’s population distribution.<sup>37</sup> Page was nonplussed by such an “ostrich-like” attitude: “future generations will rue our short-sightedness” he decried. He for one “did not look forward to the six capital cities of Australia simply continuing to grow larger and larger without the institution of large civic centres elsewhere”, enabled by the better distribution of power.<sup>38</sup>

A major gap between Page and the state ministers was his conviction that industrial development would surely follow the provision of electrical power. He rhetorically challenged them on “whether power follows population and industries, or whether it is not the other way about,” and then supplied the answer himself – that “the history of development throughout the world is that where the power is you also have population and industries.” Hence zinc was mined at Broken Hill but sent to Risdon in Tasmania where hydroelectricity was used in producing zinc ingots. The electrification of Australia “will induce other industries to come here, and so the whole thing will proceed in a beneficial circle, enabling us to grow up, not only a contented people, but also in sufficient numbers to hold this continent for the Empire.” Yet in the end the assembled ministers reluctantly agreed merely to submit information on their state’s

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<sup>36</sup> Agenda paper, ‘Standardisation of Electrical Power Schemes’, p. 71, EPP, folder 1045.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72. See also John Monash’s Presidential Address to the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science, Adelaide, 25 August 1924, reported in the *Adelaide Advertiser*, 26 August 1924, p. 14. Monash, a revered wartime figure, was now general manager of Victoria’s SEC.

<sup>38</sup> Agenda paper, ‘Standardisation of Electrical Power Schemes’, *ibid.*, p. 75.

respective power resources to an advisory board (or boards) on standardisation.<sup>39</sup>

This was a prominent early instance of Page seriously misreading state governments, and a formative encounter with their sensitivity to any redistribution of authority to the Commonwealth. On this occasion it was the Commonwealth's presumption that they resented more than the idea of efficient electrification. (The Victorian minister pointed out that the states were already working towards standardisation of production and transmission). Page was only ever to get his way with the states by bluntly applying the Commonwealth's growing fiscal power in a federal system that he openly disdained.

The Bruce-Page government was very receptive to policy advice from industry leaders, including in electricity. The year after this Premiers' Conference, it readily agreed when the Australian Commonwealth Engineering Standards Association, a semi-private body that included Commonwealth and state government representatives, proposed using its existing work on standardisation as the basis for being entrusted with some of what Page had intended for his Federal-State Commission.<sup>40</sup> The Commonwealth provided financial support for the Association's "complete survey of the Power Resources of Australia, with a view to their development and more economical and efficient use."<sup>41</sup> Although Page in his memoirs duly held this up as an outstanding example of industry-led national co-ordination, it never provided effective national planning of electrification.<sup>42</sup>

Page continued to press for the planning and standardisation of national electrification by other means. This was typical Page – simultaneously pursuing whatever paths to his goals seemed to be available, with means never being as important as his grand ends. On planning, he attempted to revive the

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75, 79.

<sup>40</sup> 'Opening Remarks' by Chairman of the National Committee of Australia of the Australian Commonwealth Engineering Standards Association, 6 May 1924, EPP, folder 1053.

<sup>41</sup> *Quarterly Bulletin*, The Institution of Engineers, Australia, Sydney, April 1924, p. 51.

<sup>42</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 171-5.

concept of a national electricity body in a 1925 proposal to Cabinet entitled 'Power Production.'<sup>43</sup> On standardisation, Page in July that year directly contacted the SEC to propose that if the state government legislated on standards for voltage and frequency, the Commonwealth would use customs legislation to ban the importation of non-compliant equipment. The SEC's Chief Engineer responded that all this would be costly and should be limited to new projects only, with the Commonwealth merely promulgating standards for which it invited the states to legislate.<sup>44</sup>

### **New states: Page seizes the opportunity of the Cohen Royal Commission**

Page's engagement with the new state issue when serving in the Bruce-Page government was very different from his efforts on federalism and hydroelectricity. He played a much more individual role, with little support from his Prime Minister. His elevation to national office in 1923 had raised the hopes of his new state followers. In fact, membership of federal Cabinet restricted Page to a more selective engagement with the cause, conducted mainly on his own terms as a senior minister whose first loyalty was to his government. He became more cautious in his public statements, curbing his allegations of urban-based conspiracies of greed. But when in 1924 the New South Wales government convened the Cohen Royal Commission to inquire into new states, Page seized the opportunity to assert himself as national leader of the new state movement with a gusto that was to help ensure its survival.

Although Bruce agreed in principle that new states were desirable, his new government signalled caution by affirming Hughes's constitutionally correct line that new states needed to be initiated by existing state governments. Bruxner's successful 1922 resolution in the New South Wales Parliament later elicited the very proper response from the Prime Minister that he would not act until the

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<sup>43</sup> 'Power Production', *op. cit.*

<sup>44</sup> H.R. Harper, chief engineer of the SEC, to Page, 27 July 1925, EPP, folder 1053.

state government came up with a solid proposal – a factor in the subsequent appointment of the Cohen Royal Commission.<sup>45</sup>

Page at first largely toed the Hughes-Bruce line on new states. He opened the second Armidale convention of the Northern New State Movement in June 1923 by announcing that it was up to state governments to make the first move.<sup>46</sup> Other parliamentary new staters were less restrained. V.C. Thompson, a backbencher, became the most ardent parliamentary agitator. In 1923 he formed a Federal Parliamentary New State League of 21 members, presided over by the unrelated W.G. Thompson, a Nationalist senator from the Queensland new state stronghold of Rockhampton. Latham sat on its executive. It was Thompson who led a delegation to Bruce in July 1923 to propose amending the Constitution to replace initiation by state parliaments with a less onerous process based on a petition of at least 20 per cent of local electors triggering a local referendum.<sup>47</sup> In 1924 and again in 1925 Thompson introduced private member's motions on a referendum to amend section 124: neither was put to the parliamentary vote.<sup>48</sup>

High ministerial office inhibited Page because of the tension new states raised with his coalition partners. There is little documentation of difficulties between Bruce and Page personally over new states, but there are occasional telling references to a wide gap between their parties. Ellis, a member of the parliamentary press gallery in those years, later wrote of the Bruce-Page Cabinet having in 1925 examined various options for amending section 124, including a constitutional session of parliament and a Royal Commission, before its eventual proposal to conduct a referendum was blocked by Nationalist MPs.<sup>49</sup> As his foremost means of implementing a pressing agenda to improve rural living standards, Page needed to make the coalition work. He

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<sup>45</sup> Aitkin, *The Colonel*, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-9; also Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, pp.168-9.

<sup>46</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, p. 176, Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 231, Farrell thesis, p. 88. See also Earle Page, *New States – Why They are Necessary in Australia*, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 10-11.

<sup>47</sup> Ellis, *ibid.*, pp. 166, 181-2; Farrell, *ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>48</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

<sup>49</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 111; Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, pp. 199-200.

had limited opportunity, especially at first, for the luxury of focusing on a personally favoured issue like new states. Promotion of such basic rural amenities as phone services and roads permeated his speeches. Speaking in December 1923 on the introduction of radio to the bush he reflected, with atypical eloquence, on his hope that “that word ‘lonely’ will be eliminated from Australian life.”<sup>50</sup>

So Page made a strategic judgment that the time was not ripe for his new state-regionalist agenda and elected to wait instead. His caution drew criticism, such as in parliament in July 1926 from Frank Forde (a Queensland Labor new stater) and Hughes (still with a personal score to settle).<sup>51</sup> But Page was prepared to momentarily re-enter the new state fray when a singularly promising opportunity suddenly opened up at the state government level. This was the 1924-25 Cohen Royal Commission, the most comprehensive of three formal inquiries into new states conducted during the inter-war period. Far from staying focused on federally-initiated constitutional reform, as suggested by Farrell, Page and the other new staters put enormous effort into trying to win over Cohen and, by extension, the government of New South Wales. In this sense they saw action at the state level as crucial in itself and not merely as a clearing of the way for federal-led change. As a willing witness before Cohen, Treasurer Page resumed his persona as an unconventional nation-shaper to produce the fullest case for new states yet seen.

A Royal Commission was first proposed at the June 1923 Armidale convention. Four months later, the Fuller state government decided against constructing a Northern Tablelands to north coast railway. This led to such protests from the True Blue Progressives – who had split from the Progressive Party in protest against coalition with the Nationalists, but whose support in parliament now kept them in office – that in December Fuller agreed to review this decision. Late in 1923 he acceded to Bruxner’s request for a Royal Commission into new

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<sup>50</sup> Page at the opening of the Wireless and Electrical Exhibition, Sydney, 12 December 1923, quoted in *Well May We Say...The Speeches that Made Australia*, Sally Warhaft, (ed.), Black Inc., Melbourne, 2004, p. 540.

<sup>51</sup> See Forde and Hughes in *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 24 June 1926, pp. 3481-8 and 3492-4.

states as part of a deal to maintain support for his government. The Royal Commissioner, Judge John Cohen, was a Grafton native, presumably coincidentally: perhaps less coincidental was that he was a former Nationalist state MP.<sup>52</sup> The Cohen Royal Commission had a very wide brief. Crucially, it was to assess the fundamental question of whether new states in New South Wales were “practical and desirable”, including whether the ends they would supposedly achieve could be more readily secured by restructuring local government.

Cohen and his fellow commissioners deliberated for over a year, from April 1924 to May 1925. This included four lengthy tours of the state’s north to gather evidence from over 200 witnesses (including a minority hostile to new states), encompassing professionals, business figures, aldermen, farmers and state government officials. Page was the new state movement’s star witness, the foremost national supporter of the allied concepts of new states, regionalism and decentralisation. Page was not queried when he described himself to the Royal Commission as “leader of the general movement for Australian subdivision.”<sup>53</sup> His evidence was typically confident and wide-ranging, but the sceptical, clinical dissection that followed was not a happy experience for him. By casting his evidence as the starting point for a strategy to regionalise the entire nation, Page also highlighted how he differed from most of the new state movement.

Page gave evidence to the Royal Commission in two long sessions, the first on 19 May 1924. As something of a historicist, he asserted that throughout world history, compact, homogenous entities were the form of government “which lends itself most readily to good government and intensive development.”<sup>54</sup> In Australia, this would solve problems of defence, population and public finance, a typical Page conflation of disparate issues. By drawing on “a higher civic spirit” to marshal their resources and develop efficient transport, self-governing

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<sup>52</sup> Aitkin, *The Colonel*, *op. cit.*, pp. 76, 78-9; Farrell thesis, *op. cit.*, p. 139; also Farrell article, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

<sup>53</sup> Earle Page, *The New State in Northern New South Wales: Resources, Finance, Government: Statement of the Case, Northern New State Movement*, Tamworth, 1924, p. 1. This is the published version of Page’s Cohen evidence.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

regions could encourage manufacturing far more effectively than would tariff protection.<sup>55</sup> Responding to probing by counsel for the Royal Commission, Page added that any 100,000 square mile area with natural resources and a population of at least 70,000 had potential to be successfully self-governing.<sup>56</sup> In attempting to persuade that beyond a certain point there was an inverse relationship between the size of a state and its production per square mile, he quoted figures comparing the relatively compact Victoria with Western Australia, ignoring differences in basic geography.<sup>57</sup> (He frequently held up Victoria as being a good size, particularly when berating New South Wales audiences).

As ever, Page dwelt on possibilities, not foreseeable limitations. Conscious as he was of the paucity of connections between existing state rail systems, he still argued that regional control of railways would result in local networks eventually adding up to an effective national system.<sup>58</sup> Nor did Page have in mind the simple replication of the existing form of state governance on a smaller geographic scale. He instead proposed to restrain government expenditure by a model based on diminutive legislatures (dubbed councils, not parliaments), unpaid MPs and a mere four ministers each. He pointedly added that “I would like to see the States called ‘Provinces’ and not ‘States’, because that would properly indicate to the public the fact that they are to deal with the local problems of the local development of their areas and not to encroach on the domain of national policy.”<sup>59</sup>

Naturally, Page focused his evidence on northern New South Wales. This region, he said, had the population, the natural resources and the overall ability to finance itself. It boasted an “exceptionally fertile” coastal belt “where drought – that spectre that haunts the balance of Australia – is practically unknown.”

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 7.

<sup>56</sup> Royal Commission of Inquiry into Proposals for the Establishment of a New State or New States, *Evidence of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Proposals for the Establishment of a New State or New States, formed wholly or in part out of the present territory of the State of New South Wales, together with the List of Exhibits and Printed Exhibits*, Government Printer, Sydney, volume 4, 1925, p. 2215.

<sup>57</sup> Page, *The New State in Northern New South Wales*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1, 6.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-22.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Unalienated land was plentiful and on the Clarence River alone “100,000 HP is possible” if a hydroelectric scheme was built. Inland, hydropower and wool could together support a textiles industry on the fertile New England Tablelands.<sup>60</sup> But when Page confidently predicted an annual revenue surplus for the new state of £416,064, state Treasury officials responded with their own calculation of a deficit of over £1.3 million.<sup>61</sup> In his second bout with Cohen, over 19-21 November 1924, Page replied to Treasury’s item-by-item dissection of his cost and revenue estimates by disputing the assumption that the new state would spend public funds at the same rate as when it was a component of New South Wales.<sup>62</sup> Treasury’s estimate reflected the “unnecessary circumlocution and consequent grave overstaffing” that characterized the existing New South Wales public service, not the slimmer apparatus Page envisaged.<sup>63</sup>

Ellis described Page as having presented an “advanced text-book of Constitutional reform.”<sup>64</sup> He attracted press attention in both city and rural newspapers, and some other witnesses referenced his evidence when presenting theirs.<sup>65</sup> Yet Page and his fellow advocates made a poor impression on the Royal Commission. The Commissioners looked carefully and critically at the case presented by the new staters to reach their central conclusion that proposals to carve three new states out of New South Wales – the north, the Riverina and the Monaro – were “neither practical nor desirable.”<sup>66</sup> They were not at all persuaded by data supposedly demonstrating that new states stimulated population growth: new state

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 8.

<sup>61</sup> These figures are taken from the transcript of evidence, volume 3, pp. 1440-1. Page estimated total expenditure by the northern new state at £2.85 million. Both sides subsequently amended their estimates, but the net difference was still approximately £1.47 million. See Farrell thesis, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

<sup>62</sup> See for example Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

<sup>63</sup> Royal Commission of Inquiry into Proposals for the Establishment of a New State or New States, *op. cit.*, 19 May 1924, p. 2173.

<sup>64</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

<sup>65</sup> See for example coverage in *The Land* of 23 May 1924, p. 5; and the evidence of Councillor Hugh McKinnon of Manning Shire Council as reported in the *Wingham Chronicle and Manning River Observer*, 26 September 1924, p. 2. For city-based coverage and reactions, see the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 May 1924, p. 5 and 22 November 1924, p. 16.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

witnesses had for example pointed to the rapid growth of the American state of Iowa without realising that much of this actually predated its statehood.<sup>67</sup>

Cohen found that new states would actually increase the cost of government and that the alleged benefits of decentralisation could be obtained by far easier means. Treasury figures contradicted assertions that the regions proposed as new states made net contributions to revenue. The port of Sydney had such spare capacity that there was little need for new regional ports. The state rail system was not, as alleged, designed to favour the metropolis over the countryside. Above all, population movement to cities was a worldwide phenomenon likely to continue in new states. Cohen added that it was beyond his terms of reference to consider whether a referendum on new states should be held, but the implication was clear.<sup>68</sup> Page and the wider new state movement also failed to address convincingly the immense practical difficulty of creating a new state, the constitutional formula being far simpler in principle than in practice. As Hughes had opined, creation of a new state required threshold issues such as the drafting of a widely acceptable new constitution and the division of assets with the parent state to have “assumed a very concrete shape” before substantive action could be taken.<sup>69</sup>

Cohen’s findings fell well short of affirming Page’s fundamental belief that smaller political units would foster civic engagement which stimulated social and economic development. They instead dampened new state agitation until another trigger arose when the economy deteriorated in the late 1920s. Although the Cohen experience demonstrated that new statism had not gained broad traction amongst opinion-makers beyond provincial elites and their circle of activists, it nonetheless suggested a wider acceptance of the allied concept of decentralisation. The Royal Commission recommended the decentralisation of administration and the strengthening of local government to address what it concluded to be the actual problem facing rural New South Wales – the

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<sup>67</sup> Farrell thesis, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

<sup>68</sup> Farrell, ‘Opting Out and Opting In’, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

<sup>69</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

centralisation of public works and social programmes.<sup>70</sup> The need for regional teachers' colleges and better public health services was especially pressing. It proposed that shires and municipalities elect District Councils to plan and manage health services, education, land settlement and public works (other than railways and large-scale irrigation).<sup>71</sup> Cohen also recommended that the state government resolve some specific grievances, notably the Northern Tablelands-north coast railway.

Page's criticisms of Cohen's findings reflected his nationwide perspective. He complained of an "absence of the consideration of the larger view which ultimately connects the new state issue with the urgent problem facing Australia, that of the National Development and Effective Occupation of the Continent."<sup>72</sup> Page cast Cohen as having adopted a provincial New South Wales outlook, reflected in such findings as that unified nationwide railway gauges would disadvantage Sydney.<sup>73</sup> Even at this still early stage of his political career, Page saw himself as habitually battling blinkered outlooks. He may not have won Cohen over, but the attention he attracted from the Royal Commission and beyond had enhanced the status of the new state movement – a Deputy Prime Minister and Treasurer had lent it his authority as a national issue. The publication of his evidence as a book (by his own Northern New State Movement) depicted Page on the cover as "Treasurer of the Commonwealth."<sup>74</sup> Page's effort to impress Cohen significantly qualifies Graham's portrayal of the new state cause as one of several that the Country Party largely shelved during the Bruce-Page years.<sup>75</sup>

Page also contrived to interpret Cohen's support for the localisation of administration as amounting to acceptance of his fundamental ideas. With some justification, he saw the recommended District Councils as an admission of the validity of his argument that the entirety of New South Wales could not be effectively administered from Sydney. Indeed, the creation of these

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<sup>70</sup> Parker, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>71</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States, op. cit.*, p. 196.

<sup>72</sup> Comments by Page on Cohen's findings, UNE Archives, New States papers, A0001, Box 14.

<sup>73</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States, op. cit.*, p. 198.

<sup>74</sup> Page, *The New State in Northern New South Wales, op. cit.*

<sup>75</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 231-2, 283-4.

Councils could lead to their spread across the nation, and serve as a step towards the formation of new states. History remained on his side – “the present New South Wales Parliament seems to be doomed”, he said, for surely the existing state would eventually be superseded.<sup>76</sup>

After Cohen, however, Page reverted to a watchful passivity on new states, consistent with his habitual preparedness to wait for a fresh opportunity. His Country Party policy speech for the 1925 election made but the briefest of references to new states and planned development.<sup>77</sup> The advent of the Bavin-Buttenshaw Nationalist-Country Party state government in October 1927 weakened the new state movement yet further. This was the first long-term urban-rural coalition in New South Wales and included David Drummond as Education Minister. It commenced new public works in the north, notably the Armidale Teachers’ College and the Guyra-Dorrigo railway.<sup>78</sup> The effectiveness with which these very visible projects deflated new state agitation says much about the shallowness of public support for the cause.

Farrell’s assessment of the northern New South Wales movement in the 1920s refers to “an unresolved tension in Page.” He raises whether he was “a true believer or merely a pragmatic opportunist who saw the political advantages of running with the New State issue?” Farrell seems to conclude that Page was the latter in the short term, for whom the issue was useful politically while he awaited the time when the new staters had the numbers.<sup>79</sup> There were indeed unresolved tensions in Page’s ideas, notably between regionalism and strong national government. But the consistency of his personal commitment to regionalism and decentralisation, as embodied in new states, was never in doubt. It is more that having built up high expectations, Page reacted to the very different political circumstance of the advent of the coalition with the Nationalists by reassessing his priorities. Unlike other new staters, he now faced such a range of pressing goals that he had to make pragmatic judgments

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<sup>76</sup> Comments by Page on Cohen’s findings, *op. cit.*

<sup>77</sup> 1925 Country Party policy speech at EPP, folder 2331.

<sup>78</sup> Farrell thesis, *op. cit.*, pp. 183, 205. There were two earlier Nationalist-Progressive governments, one of which lasted only a day.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

about their relative priority. He at least used Cohen to uphold publicly the new state concept when it could have faded for good in the face of the Royal Commission's withering criticisms. His lifelong commitment to new states resurfaced resoundingly when circumstances turned again in 1931-32.

Page's commitment is also evident in his enthusiastic engagement with some fleeting new state initiatives by his own government. The Bruce-Page government twice attempted to create new states in northern and central Australia, even in the 1920s long a focal point for hopes and assumptions about Australian development. The government was willing to pursue new states when this did not risk a major confrontation with its own Nationalist MPs or the existing states with whom it had much else to negotiate.

In 1926 the Commonwealth responded to recommendations of the 1925 Royal Commission on Western Australian Disabilities Under Federation by proposing to annex the state's territory north of the 26th parallel.<sup>80</sup> The state government would be relieved of all liability from loan monies spent on the north and the Commonwealth would spend £5 million on the region's development annually for ten years, from which a new state could be created.<sup>81</sup> Page later commented that at that this time his immediate interest in this region was the "balanced representation in the federal parliament" of the western half of the nation, and only eventually a new state. The plan foundered over the conditions of the proposed federal expenditure: Page refused to guarantee this allocation until there had been a full assessment of the region's needs.<sup>82</sup> The following year the Bruce-Page government divided the Commonwealth-administered Northern Territory into North Australia and Central Australia. During debate on the legislation Bruce referred to their eventually becoming

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<sup>80</sup> The 1910s and 1920s were the high point of Commonwealth use of Royal Commissions, making them a common means of addressing difficult policy issues; there were 56 Commonwealth Royal Commissions from 1911 to 1929, but after that only ten up to the early 1970s. See Brian Galligan, 'Royal Commissions', in Brian Galligan and Winsome Roberts (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Politics*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2007, p. 522.

<sup>81</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-6, 266-8; Page, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 12 October 1961, p. 1985.

<sup>82</sup> Ellis, *ibid.*, p. 186.

“States of the Commonwealth.”<sup>83</sup> Each was endowed with a Government Resident and an Advisory Council, and a North Australia Commission was created to oversee the development of both regions. Neither survived the fall of the Bruce-Page government and a united Northern Territory was re-established in 1931.

### **Tied grants for rural roads: Page helps alter the federation**

Page had more practical success in furthering his national vision via the narrower but more widely acceptable field of tied Commonwealth grants for rural roads. As a fiscal conservative, he professed to be affronted by vertical fiscal imbalance. But his national development agenda, especially for rural Australia, and his impatience with state governments, were more immediately important to him. This order of priorities is exemplified by his role in imposing these grants on the states.

Page was motivated by his regionalist vision and longstanding commitment to improved rural roads. In his memoirs he wrote vividly of how as a young doctor he was “no stranger to the primitive and gruelling transport system which served most parts of Australia” and the results of this for critically ill patients.<sup>84</sup> Commonwealth tied grants for roads did not start with Page. In 1922 the Commonwealth distributed £250,000 between the states on a per capita basis that it insisted be directed to rural roads which improved market access by soldier settlers. This was a historic step in Commonwealth-state financial relations, yet the parliamentary debate on the legislation – a wide-ranging Act on the expenditure of Commonwealth loans – barely addressed these *inter alia* grants.<sup>85</sup> They are not mentioned in Page’s memoirs.

Page became the first federal Minister to systematically use section 96 of the Constitution to make tied Commonwealth grants to the states. In 1923 the

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<sup>83</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 10 February 1926, p. 824.

<sup>84</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>85</sup> Bureau of Transport Economics, *Road Grants Legislation in Australia: Commonwealth Government Involvement, 1900-1981*, Bureau of Transport Economics Occasional Paper No. 8, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1981, p. 5. The legislation was the *Loan Act 1922*.

Royal Commission on Taxation briefly noted that this Commonwealth power to “grant financial assistance to any State on such terms and conditions as Parliament thinks fit” would include specifying end uses.<sup>86</sup> The introduction of such grants for road construction over three years from 1923 marked the effective start of what constituted the main form of tied grants for the next thirty years. This “interesting exception to the general philosophy of the Commonwealth concerning grants to the states” was an important early instance of the Constitution being interpreted according to its literal wording to get the desired result instead of honouring the intentions of its drafters. Over succeeding decades tied grants gradually became central to Commonwealth-state financial relations.<sup>87</sup> As such, this constitutes an important part of Page’s legacy.

These grants were first mooted at the Premiers’ Conference of May 1923, leading to the 1923 *Main Roads Development Act*. The Commonwealth directed £500,000 to the states to construct rural main roads, to be matched pound for pound by each state up to their prescribed share of the total (based on a mixture of population and geographic size). Proposals for specific projects had to be approved by the Commonwealth Minister for Works and Railways (then Percy Stewart).<sup>88</sup> Similar arrangements were repeated in 1924, and again in 1925 when funding was greatly increased. The Commonwealth was clearly signalling a lack of trust in state willingness to pursue national development vigorously, a characteristic Page concern.

That the Commonwealth’s concurrent negotiations with the states over wider federal financial relations never seem to have jeopardised these tied grants is a measure of their importance to Page. His action as the initial scheme approached expiration at the end of 1925-26 is a fine example of his commitment and rationalism. Returning from his 1925 trip to the United States and Canada during which he had studied federal and local government road policies, he proposed the creation of a new Federal Highways Commission of

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<sup>86</sup> Gates, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

<sup>87</sup> Mathews and Jay, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-9. Page’s ADB entry states that he acquired the idea of tied grants from the Royal Commission on Taxation.

<sup>88</sup> Draft agenda paper ‘Proposed National Main Road Development’, in NAA, CP103/11 818, Notes on Various Subjects to be Raised at Premiers’ Conference 1923.

senior Commonwealth and state engineers to plan out a national road network, and to be empowered to apportion monies for works accordingly.<sup>89</sup> Following its re-election in November 1925, the Bruce-Page government moved to fund its increased road grants by higher customs duties on petrol. Page said that this would protect locally-owned refiners (then essentially the Commonwealth-owned Commonwealth Oil Refineries) and make up for tax avoidance by larger foreign-owned oil companies.<sup>90</sup> The Commonwealth also argued that using petrol duties to generate the revenue required was equitable in that the cost was borne by road users.<sup>91</sup>

The result was the *Federal Aid Roads Act* of 1926. This was widely recognised as having quite different implications for federal-state relations than previous legislation, by allocating £2 million annually to the states for an unprecedented ten-year period and imposing a far greater degree of Commonwealth control. Despite Page's pleas that "good roads, and an efficient transport system, are an essential part of our machinery of national development", the legislation met with objections ranging from the threat road transport posed to railways to denunciations of the petrol duty.<sup>92</sup> It was opposed not only by oil companies but was also the subject of unsuccessful legal challenges by Victoria and South Australia that reached the Privy Council.<sup>93</sup> Its importance to Page is reflected in his vitriolic ripostes to the oil companies, calling them "monopolistic foreign importing interests" bent on "the scotching of any development whatever in the Commonwealth that will tend to make us more independent of them."<sup>94</sup> The government's justification remained simple. The Minister for Works and

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<sup>89</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 177; see also 'Roads', an undated memo reporting on the US and Canadian systems of road funding that recommended an Australian Federal Highways Commission, EPP, folder 1775.

<sup>90</sup> See Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 178; see also draft of this part of *Truant Surgeon*, 'National Transport System', at EPP, folder 1857.

<sup>91</sup> *Road Grants Legislation in Australia: Commonwealth Government Involvement, 1900-1981*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>92</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 6 August 1926, pp. 5030.

<sup>93</sup> A young Robert Menzies appeared as a counsel for Victoria. He argued that section 96 referred only to the strictly financial terms of Commonwealth assistance to the states and was not intended to effectively broaden Commonwealth powers. His client lost, although the High Court did rule that states had the right to refuse a tied grant. Menzies did not mention Page in his published account of the origins of tied grants; see his *Central Power in the Australian Commonwealth: An Examination of the Growth of Commonwealth Power in the Australian Federation*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1967, pp. 76-7.

<sup>94</sup> Draft speech by Page, undated, c. 1926, EPP, folder 417.

Railways (now W.C. Hill) spoke of roads as “a problem of national importance, and of too great magnitude for the various State Governments to handle without the aid of the National Government.”<sup>95</sup>

The 1926 Act’s funding was mostly for rural roads, including “main roads which open up and develop new country.”<sup>96</sup> Following the American example, the Commonwealth imposed detailed specifications for road construction.<sup>97</sup> The states had to submit proposals covering a five-year period for approval by the Commonwealth Minister, and add 15 shillings for every pound they received (equating to 75 per cent of the Commonwealth grant). All roads built using these grants were to be maintained by the states out of other funds and to the satisfaction of the Commonwealth, or else grants could be suspended.<sup>98</sup> Page’s powerful Federal Highways Commission was not established, but a Federal Aid Roads Board served as a consultative body of ministers and engineers. This 1926 model survived until just 1931, when the Scullin government gave the states much more autonomy in the use of the grants.<sup>99</sup>

Over a decade later, Page looked back on the 1926 Act as having “revolutionised in many respects the whole of the roads problem of Australia.”<sup>100</sup> In his 1956 evidence to a New South Wales inquiry into local government boundaries, he spoke proudly of having been personally responsible for this scheme, “the main defence against shire bankruptcy, under which the road user pays his fair share of road construction and upkeep in addition to the contributions of the local residents and ratepayers.”<sup>101</sup> Despite the challenges from the states, Page did not see himself as using the roads

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<sup>95</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 27 July 1926, p. 4590.

<sup>96</sup> s5 of the *Federal Aid Roads Act* 1926.

<sup>97</sup> Mathews and Jay, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

<sup>98</sup> ‘Memorandum on Federal Aid Roads’, an undated history of road funding prepared by or for Page, c. 1947, EPP, folder 2577.

<sup>99</sup> States no longer had to provide matching funds and could now use the grants for maintenance and repair; see James A. Maxwell, *Commonwealth-State Financial Relations in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1967, p. 49. Scullin even spoke of the Commonwealth withdrawing to effectively act as a mere agent of the states by collecting the petrol tax on their behalf; see Bureau of Transport Economics, *op. cit.*, pp. 16, 18.

<sup>100</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 30 June 1937, p. 753.

<sup>101</sup> ‘Local Government Enquiry Commencing at Grafton on 10<sup>th</sup> September 1956 on Proposed Redivision of Local Government Boundaries – Evidence of Sir Earle Page, MP’, EPP, folder 1798.

scheme to impose unreasonable control. When the Chifley government tightened road funding arrangements in 1947, Page complained of the Commonwealth becoming “the controller instead of the partner.”<sup>102</sup>

There is support for Page’s claims about his decisive personal role in these early tied grants for roads. In 1950 the Australian Automobile Association attributed the 1923 legislation to “crusading countrymen” in the federal parliament. It added that the 1926 legislation, “derived from American and Canadian practice”, had “exerted a revolutionary influence on road patterns, construction, administration and finance.”<sup>103</sup> In a 1952 speech Sir John Kemp, chairman of the Queensland Main Roads Board and delegate to a 1926 national conference of roads ministers and engineers, credited Page with creating the roads grants and having “inaugurated what until recently was the greatest scheme of public works Australia had yet seen.”<sup>104</sup>

Further tied grants to the states were legislated for in 1927 to help farmers purchase rabbit-proof fencing.<sup>105</sup> Tied grants eventually become a staple of Commonwealth-state financial relations that enabled the Commonwealth to use its growing fiscal power to impose control and reap kudos. They were most famously used in the post-war era and beyond as the main basis for Commonwealth funding of higher education. Page’s contribution to institutionalising tied grants alone gives him a significant place in the evolution of the Australian federation. He later became an advocate of all Commonwealth grants to the states being tied to a specific purpose, particularly for hydroengineering. In a speech of May 1956 Page told parliament that “it is absurd that we in this parliament should be raising enormous sums of money, and making ourselves most unpopular throughout Australia, simply to hand the

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<sup>102</sup> ‘Memorandum on Federal Aid Roads’, *op. cit.*

<sup>103</sup> Australian Automobile Association, *A National Roads Policy for Australia*, issued as a submission to the Commonwealth government, Wynyard, c. 1950, pp. 8-9, copy at EPP, folder 1238.

<sup>104</sup> Sir John Kemp speech, ‘Some Aspects of Modern Transport and their Relation to Road Construction,’ 20 March 1952, EPP, folder 1238; see also Kay Cohen, ‘Kemp, Sir John Robert (1883-1955)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/kemp-sir-john-robert-10717/text18987>, published first in hardcopy volume 15, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2000. The Bruce Highway in Queensland is, incidentally, named not for Stanley Bruce but for one Henry Adam Bruce, a Labor state and federal parliamentarian.

<sup>105</sup> This was the *Wire and Wire Netting Act 1927*.

money to the states without any tag on it at all; without any suggestion that there should be co-ordination.” With no small degree of overstatement, he said that the Commonwealth should re-establish how “in the 1920s there was a most cordial co-operation with all the states.”<sup>106</sup> Page was more successful with roads than he was with national railway unification: a notable exception was the unification of the Sydney-Brisbane line that included construction of a bridge over the Clarence at Grafton.<sup>107</sup> (Page used Commonwealth funding to do much for his electorate, such as legislation in 1924 for the Grafton-to-Brisbane rail line, sealing of the road from Grafton to the coast and assistance to the dairy industry).

Page never saw himself as being absolutely bound by obligations to the governments in which he served. Bruce’s allowing him latitude to pursue some of his personal goals was perhaps due to the Prime Minister privately reasoning that this was part of the price of a successful partnership. Page accepted many of the inevitable strictures of high office, but remained alert to how his status as a senior government minister presented him with opportunities to pursue his personal policy vision, always his ultimate interest. As Commonwealth Treasurer he demonstrated this in the fields of hydroelectricity, new states and tied grants.

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<sup>106</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 22 May 1956, pp. 2321, 2322.

<sup>107</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 180-2. The bridge was completed in 1930, after the Bruce-Page government had lost office.

## **CHAPTER 4 – PAGE’S STANDING IN GOVERNMENT AND PARTY: THE BASIS OF HIS POWER**

This chapter builds on the preceding narrative-based assessment of Page’s policy campaigns by considering how his position as the second most senior minister in the Bruce-Page government and leader of the Country Party contributed to his ability to pursue these initiatives. Although Page the personality was a singular holder of high office, the dynamics and priorities of both government and party provided him with the confidence and opportunity to pursue his developmentalist vision. Page’s policy influence was based on his compatibility with Stanley Bruce’s and his government’s commitment to national development; the maintenance of the Country Party-Nationalist coalition; and on the effective consolidation of policy authority within the Country Party with the leader of the federal parliamentary party. Events in the mid-1920s were especially important, when Page decisively defended the coalition from internal challenges and shifted the locus of power in his party away from farmers’ organisations and towards himself.

### **Treasurer Page in office**

Page was a confident Treasurer and party leader, imbued with a striving sense of personal purpose. He was consciously different from other politicians, not least through his continuing to live up to the truant surgeon tag by, as Ellis put it, being willing to “as cheerfully minister to a violent opponent as to a firm political friend.”<sup>1</sup> Recollections of peers and adversaries alike give a strong impression of an assertive minister who ranged far beyond his portfolio responsibilities in pursuing his national vision. Jack Lang recalled how as a newly elected Premier of New South Wales in 1925 he received a visitation from the Commonwealth Treasurer: Page “bustled in, full of energy and assurance”, and “seemed to think that...my agreement was only a matter of form.” Lang felt that Page “was lecturing me as if I was a young medical

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<sup>1</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 326.

student.”<sup>2</sup> Page’s high standing in the Bruce-Page government lent him an expectation of a say in almost every major decision and a vantage point from which to survey the direction of the entire nation.

As Treasurer, Page’s agreement in principle with the need to restrict government expenditure was never allowed to obstruct his developmentalist agenda. He took little interest in a Commonwealth public service that was then “strong on process but often weak on specific qualifications for the tasks at hand”, and hence “dominated by accounting principles.”<sup>3</sup> His personal papers and official records in the National Archives of Australia contain scant evidence of reliance on his own Department for support of any sort. His memoirs make only passing reference to just one of the two Secretaries of the Treasury who worked under him (James Collins, for his assistance in 1924 with legislation on central banking).<sup>4</sup> At the day-to-day level, Page “brought despair to secretaries, public servants and fellow ministers bearing neat files of papers and impeccable records” by dismembering the files in question. Exchanges with senior officials gave the superficial illusion that he lacked purpose as conversation leapt from topic to topic and was at risk of termination by a sudden Page decision to break for a game of tennis or a nap on his office couch.<sup>5</sup> Frank Green noted with distaste Page’s habit of assuming that a partner in conversation agreed with him and concluding the matter under discussion by simply moving on to another issue.<sup>6</sup>

Yet even if the public service had been strong on policy advising, Page would not have let it intrude on this agenda. He habitually sought outside experts to help him pursue his goals. Page conspicuously did not conform to the early Country Party’s suspicion of big business and so sought the counsel of such figures as Herbert Gepp, general manager of the Electrolytic Zinc Company,

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<sup>2</sup> Jack Lang, *I Remember: Autobiography*, McNamara's Books, Katoomba, 1980 (first published 1956), p. 239.

<sup>3</sup> First quote, Nicholas Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 408; second quote, Greg Whitwell, *The Treasury Line*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1986, pp. 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 142. The other was James Heathershaw. Both were career officers of Treasury.

<sup>5</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, pp. 326-7.

<sup>6</sup> Green, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

and F.B. (Tim) Clapp, Chairman of Australian General Electric. Page the incorrigible optimist assumed that a policy case presented clearly and logically to people of influence would be bound to win their support, a belief that was to survive repeated disappointments which would have discouraged a less persistent man. By contrast, Page made few attempts to reach out to organised labour.

His attraction to robust business leaders was leavened by ongoing dealings with progressive intellectual figures such as Griffith Taylor and the pioneering sociologist C.H. Northcott. His sporadic dalliances with these figures were conducted through correspondence, perusal of their publications and occasional meetings. The emphasis was more on validation of his ideas than openness to new concepts. Northcott, for example, (who also hailed from the Clarence River region), corresponded with Page on shared interest in population distribution and a proposed expert commission to assess new legislation.<sup>7</sup> Page drew on whatever written authorities and exemplars seemed to offer support. One of his favourite sources was a 1922 study of the economic history of the United States by the British trade diplomat John Joyce Broderick. He interpreted this authoritative text very liberally over decades, such as its comments on the significance of electrification. Page found Broderick especially handy for making the case that new states would of themselves spark development.<sup>8</sup>

What influence such progressive thinkers had on Page was to the not inconsiderable extent that during the 1920s he became an advocate of national efficiency. This very broad concept was in practice “synonymous with whatever was virtuous in progressive eyes”, but was taken by Page to mean government structures that could further his national vision through such means as

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<sup>7</sup> Clarence H. Northcott, *Australian Social Development*, Columbia University, New York, 1918, pp. 291-5; see also Northcott's farewell letter to Page, 5 September 1928, as he returned to England, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, Box 10, folder 80.

<sup>8</sup> *Report on the Economic, Financial and Industrial Conditions of the United States of America in 1922* by Sir John Joyce Broderick, Department of Overseas Trade, HMSO, London, 1923. The copy at EPP folder 2723 bears Page's personal highlighting of such passages as those on assistance to farmers and hydroelectricity. This report was still being referenced by Page in his 12 April 1957 speech to the Country Party Annual Conference; see EPP folder 2607.

economic planning, co-ordination between levels of government and the selective nurturing of industries – not efficiency as imposed by rule of the free market.<sup>9</sup> In 1926 the *Adelaide Register* dismissed a characteristic Page speech as being of “prodigious length, disarmingly egotistical and generously studded with references to national development, orderly marketing, improved distribution and all else that may be summed up in the blessed words National Efficiency.”<sup>10</sup>

In private, Page occasionally complained of the pressures of political life and contrasted the ugliness of party politics with his own higher values. In August 1922, amidst his harrying of the Hughes government, he shared with his wife his despair that politics brought out “the lowest in human nature.” Amidst the “fighting with tooth and claw,” both “H & M.G.” (Hughes and Massy-Greene) were “unscrupulous to a degree”, as against the “clear thinking and straight acting” that Page saw himself upholding. Page feared that he was “just too soft for this work.”<sup>11</sup> Such dark reflections were to re-appear in the late 1930s. Page kept his personal fears to himself and to his wife; others rarely sensed any doubts. Late in 1924, he proceeded on what was publicly described as a “health trip” to North America as “Dr Page’s health has for some time been unsatisfactory, due largely to the strenuous time he had last year.”<sup>12</sup> Yet even on this trip Page immersed himself in United States and Canadian development policy and returned home brimming with ideas on roads and much else.

### **Page and Bruce: not so odd a couple**

The Bruce-Page government almost immediately established itself as Australia’s most self-consciously developmentalist administration since Federation, providing Page with a sound platform that he both benefitted from and contributed to. Although the 1920s was a decade of widespread optimism

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<sup>9</sup> Quote from Michael Roe *Nine Australian Progressives: Vitalism in Bourgeois Social Thought 1890-1960*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1984, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Editorial in the *Adelaide Register* of 22 June 1926, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Page to Ethel Page, 13 August 1922, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, Box 9, folder 71.

<sup>12</sup> *Daily Examiner*, 27 December 1924, p. 3. The term “health trip” is used for example in the Perth *Daily News*, 15 December 1924, p. 7.

about Australian development, the shared determination of Bruce and Page was needed to translate this into policy. They did not move as stealthily as has sometimes been claimed.<sup>13</sup> From the outset they tried to alter fundamentals, strongly signalled by the comprehensive co-ordination with the states that they proposed at the 1923 Premiers' Conference, just three months after coming to office. Staley and Nethercote in their overview of Australian liberalism considered that Bruce and Page had headed a government of "active interventionism."<sup>14</sup> They did more than any of their predecessors and most of their successors to define and consolidate the role of the Commonwealth in promoting national development. This was by asserting its leadership of policy fields where it shared responsibilities with the states, by overhauling federal financial relations and, later in the decade, by promoting economic planning. These two inexperienced party leaders thus took charge of debate about the fundamentals of the Australian federation, with Page making important contributions in co-operative federalism, planning and tied grants. Page's later view of the 1920s as a creative period when the coalition with the Nationalists "permitted enormous strides to be made in Australian progress" testifies to the alacrity with which he and Bruce sought to reorganise the nation to developmentalist ends.<sup>15</sup>

The rapid forging of the coalition by Bruce and Page and the largely effective collaboration that followed was made possible by their being closer in broad policy outlook than is often realised. At the personal level, Page seemed scattergun alongside the stately, measured Bruce, but this was more stylistic than substantive. They shared a national outlook underpinned by faith in efficient, rational governance firmly under Commonwealth leadership: unusually for party leaders of their time, neither had served in a state or colonial parliament. Ellis wrote as a witness of "a unique partnership between these two complementary personalities imbued with similar broad objectives."<sup>16</sup> Page

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Murray thought that the Bruce-Page government proceeded at a "steady, measured pace" compared, for example, to the Whitlam government; see Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

<sup>14</sup> A.A. Staley and J.R. Nethercote, 'Liberalism and the Australian Federation' in Nethercote, *op. cit.*, p. 8; see also in this source Nethercote, 'Liberalism, Nationalism and Coalition 1910-29', especially pp. 128-33.

<sup>15</sup> 'Australian Country Party Complimentary Dinner to Sir Earle Page', *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

thought that his working relationship with Bruce was “from the outset...intimate and cordial”, and so he had “few qualms about walking down the passage to see him, with or without knocking on the door.”<sup>17</sup> He recalled that at the outset “Bruce and I had no difficulty in agreeing on the principle that a Government and the members of the Government should always express one opinion, and one voice only, on matters of government policy”, and that it was rare for the Bruce-Page Cabinet to resort to a vote.<sup>18</sup>

Fundamental to their ability to work well together was the broad compatibility of the two men’s respective visions of economic development. Bruce’s was less fully defined than that of Page, and so remains open to wider interpretation. The Prime Minister’s approach emphasised increasing the scale of the economy via immigration based on the more extensive and intensive use of rural land. He told an Imperial Conference in 1924 that “Australia’s aim above everything else is to populate her country and advance from her position of a very small people occupying a very vast territory.”<sup>19</sup> This goal was closely linked to a larger vision for the economic development of the Empire, with Britain supplying manufactures and finance to Dominions which in return provided foodstuffs, raw materials and outlets for excess population. Page recalled having also long seen a bigger population as essential for the nation’s ability to “save enough to provide the amenities and developments for future generations” and “to defend it against outside foes.”<sup>20</sup> The very mixed economic circumstances of the 1920s also helped Page, in that the Bruce-Page government felt it had a duty to enliven a generally sluggish economy. This “deeply disturbed course of economic activity” included a slight recession in the early 1920s and a dip in economic activity from 1925-6 that heralded the Great Depression.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>18</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in W.H. Richmond, ‘S.M. Bruce and Australian Economic Policy 1923-9’, *Australian Economic History Review*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1983, p. 239. Richmond does not discuss Page’s views.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Australian Country Party Complimentary Dinner to Sir Earle Page’, *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> Butlin, Barnard and Pincus, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-80.

Like Page, Bruce saw natural resources as key to the nation's future: the economic historian W.H. Richmond classified him as a "rural optimist." Bruce did not advocate a fully *laissez-faire* economy, and accepted arbitration and tariffs as important, though not central.<sup>22</sup> He accepted also that rural industries needed government assistance to secure better access to British markets, notably through Imperial preference and marketing support. But he greatly preferred that primary producers improve their international competitiveness by more efficient management and promotion rather than reliance on continued government support. Like Page, Bruce was more interested in improving efficiency than in protecting rural producers through orderly marketing.<sup>23</sup> He agreed with Page that protection should favour efficient industries so as not to unduly handicap those rural producers who had to compete internationally. But he struggled to find a logical basis for determining tariff levels and for identifying which industries should be protected. A major gap between the two was that Bruce remained only a tepid advocate of new states and regionalism, as Thompson's 1923 delegation discovered. Like Hughes, Bruce put much of the onus for new states back onto state governments.<sup>24</sup>

Both men thought of themselves as essentially apolitical. As one of the few Australian national political leaders with a personal background in commerce rather than party politics, Bruce claimed that "we were guided not by ideological motives, but by strict business principles."<sup>25</sup> He and Page shared a lack of faith in the capacity of established government departments to implement developmentalist strategy. They instead tried to institutionalise rationalism and efficiency through a string of boards and commissions led by forceful, technocratic business leaders such as Gepp, their epitome of a modern manager.<sup>26</sup> This included the 1926 creation of the CSIR, Australia's first effective national science agency and which had a strong emphasis on rural

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<sup>22</sup> Richmond, *op. cit.*, pp. 238-40, 256.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 244-6.

<sup>24</sup> Farrell thesis, *op. cit.*, p. 86; Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, pp. 168-9.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Judith Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class: From Alfred Deakin to John Howard*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 80.

<sup>26</sup> See Roger Wettenhall, 'Federal Labor and the Statutory Corporation under Matthew Charlton', in *Public Enterprise and National Development: Selected Essays*, Royal Australian Institute of Public Administration (A.C.T. Division) in association with the National Council, Royal Australian Institute of Public Administration, Canberra, 1987, p. 35.

research. Bruce described it as a “really effective instrument for the promotion of greater efficiency in Australia, and to ensure the investigation of some of those great problems which we must overcome if we are not to be handicapped in our national development.”<sup>27</sup> Page attributed his own strong support for the CSIR to “my country background and scientific training.”<sup>28</sup> The Bruce-Page government also established at about the same time the Development and Migration Commission as a planning and advisory body to reinforce efficiency and population growth by guiding the placement of the greatest number of migrants on the land at the lowest cost.<sup>29</sup> (This Commission is described in more detail in the following chapter). Guiding principles of national efficiency under Commonwealth leadership did not readily appeal to state governments wary of Commonwealth intrusions, with the result that at Premiers’ Conferences Bruce considered it necessary to exhort the states to place national duty above politics.

Page also largely matched his Prime Minister on the wider public issues that defined the party divide with the ALP. He often spoke of the deep divisions between the government and a Labor Opposition that was both highly protectionist and opposed to large-scale migration. Page strongly favoured private control of the main means of production, declaring himself during the 1922 election campaign in favour of “the strictest limitation of Government enterprise to developmental works and public utilities.”<sup>30</sup> He preferred voluntary commissions to compulsory arbitration, and producer-led voluntary co-operative pools over compulsory government-managed pools. Page agreed to the sale of public enterprises such as the Commonwealth Harness Factory, the Williamstown Dockyards, the Commonwealth Woollen Mills and the Commonwealth Shipping Line and also supported the termination of Commonwealth control of the sale of sugar.<sup>31</sup> Yet, as Page saw himself as

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<sup>27</sup> Bruce speaking to the House of Representatives in 1926 on legislation to create the CSIR, quoted in Sir George Currie and John Graham, *The Origins of CSIRO: Science and the Commonwealth Government 1901-1926*, Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, Melbourne, 1966, p. 136.

<sup>28</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>29</sup> Richmond, *op. cit.*, p. 247. The Bruce-Page government just before its fall also legislated for a Bureau of Economic Research.

<sup>30</sup> *Argus*, 27 October 1922, p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-7.

more practical than ideological, he had few qualms about supporting creation of a publicly-owned central bank. Page also fully backed (but did not lead) Bruce's and the Nationalists' reactions to industrial turmoil. He recalled of the shipping strike of 1925 that the government had gone to the election of that year "on the issue of a mandate to enforce constitutional law against mob rules [*sic*] and strikes", and that the government's whole record "depended on a united resistance to Labour [*sic*] doctrine and industrial anarchy." He saw no prospect of a rapprochement with the ALP on these matters.<sup>32</sup>

The priority that Page attached to maintaining the coalition meant that he was usually at pains to work well with Bruce. But Page appears to have overestimated the depth of their relationship and at times inadvertently tested the Prime Minister's tolerance. Bruce's comments to his first biographer, Cecil Edwards, imply that he saw their closeness as more political than personal. Although it was "a more or less happy combination," Bruce's recollections of Page's daily "new brainwaves" that "were nearly always half-baked" indicate wariness on his part.<sup>33</sup> Bruce's attitude to Page remained necessarily different from that towards other ministers, as their ability to work together was essential to the government's survival. The Prime Minister's tolerant (if patrician) nature helped. Edwards recalled Bruce as being "kind and helpful" to him when a novice member of the press gallery in the early 1920s, and invariably "courteous and dependable" thereafter.<sup>34</sup> Bruce's appreciation of Page's strengths and weaknesses was the basis of his ability to productively channel his deputy's enthusiasms. He recognised Page's creativity but doubted his ability to persuade – "Page could have the most brilliant idea on earth, but he couldn't put it over."<sup>35</sup> Hence Bruce's practice of opening Premiers' Conferences himself with long statements of intent that left Page with a subsidiary role in subsequent debate.

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Edwards, *Bruce of Melbourne*, *op. cit.*, p. 82. See Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 279 for similar private comments made by Bruce in 1939.

<sup>34</sup> Edwards, *The Editor Regrets*, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>35</sup> Edwards, *Bruce of Melbourne*, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

Most historians correctly picture the Bruce-Page government as a genuine partnership, but one led by Bruce.<sup>36</sup> They were not equals in government. Page often initiated proposals, but Bruce retained final say. As their ministerial colleague George Pearce observed, Bruce ultimately ran his own administration and frequently saw advantage in letting Page think he was in charge.<sup>37</sup> Page's own recollections are broadly consistent with this image of Page initiating but with the Prime Minister having authority to veto. He recalled that Bruce "would cross-examine me for hours on every phrase; ruminate on the problem for a day or two, expound its details with the greatest clarity, and often suggest modifications or amendments which would strengthen its foundations."<sup>38</sup> One of the most detailed studies to touch on the policy interaction of the two concerns Australia's support for a British return to the gold standard: it is evident that Bruce had retained first say and issued guidance to his Treasurer accordingly.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, when Bruce departed overseas in 1926, he presented Page with detailed written instructions on how he wanted outstanding business managed in his absence, ranging from War Service Homes to an offer from Sidney Myer to act as an Australian trade representative, hardly the act of a Prime Minister not in full charge.<sup>40</sup>

In recording the achievements of the Bruce-Page government, Ellis implied that most had been driven by Page alone. His history of the Country Party, for example, lists initiatives that Page proposed in a flurry of memoranda prepared after returning from his travels in North America and Britain during 1925 – the creation of a federal Department of Agriculture (initially the Department of Markets), rural credits, a National Health Council, and tied grants for water and

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<sup>36</sup> Robert Murray is an exception, having written that "It is still open to question who was the boss in this amazingly smooth partnership"; Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Heydon, *Quiet Decision: A Study of George Foster Pearce*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1965, pp. 92, 94. Bruce commented that *Truant Surgeon* seemed to suggest that "all our best ideas originated with him" but claimed to be "not frightfully concerned which of the things we did originated with him or with me"; see Edwards, *Bruce of Melbourne*, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

<sup>38</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

<sup>39</sup> Kosmas Tsokhas, 'The Australian Role in Britain's Return to the Gold Standard', *Economic History Review*, vol. 47, no. 1, February 1994; see especially p. 134.

<sup>40</sup> See Bruce to Page, 5 September 1926, EPP, folder 2368. Bruce's skill in managing Page raises a point made much later by a British political scientist that "good leadership...should never be confused with the overmighty power of overweening individuals"; see Archie Brown, *The Myth of the Strong Leader: Political Leadership in the Modern Age*, p. xii, Vintage Books, London, 2015 (first published 2014).

sewage in country towns (subsequently thwarted by the states) and for roads.<sup>41</sup> This is an impressive list and a testament to Page's creativity. If he did not lead the government, Page nonetheless marked himself as a more original thinker than Bruce by adding a regionalist dimension to national policy and by linking different policy fields to a wider purpose of shaping the nation accordingly. The rural bias of the Bruce-Page government was not just crude pork-barrelling but also reflected Page's commitment to spatially-based development.

Against this, Ellis's list consists mainly of matters of interest specifically to the Country Party. It does not include several Bruce-Page initiatives of this time that had broader national significance, such as the Financial Agreement, which have a mixed provenance Page must share with Bruce. Nor did Ellis dwell on outcomes Page was largely unable to achieve, notably decentralisation, hydroelectricity, new states and related constitutional change. Bruce remained far less interested in these than did Page. It is significant that where Page failed in an objective he lacked Bruce's wholehearted support. To achieve major change, the Bruce-Page government needed the full engagement of both party leaders, particularly in the united application of Commonwealth fiscal power to overcome opposition from state governments.

### **Page upholds the coalition**

The foremost means by which Page enhanced his standing in government and party was his consolidation of the coalition with the Nationalists. The agreement that he and Bruce forged in 1922-23 faced periodic challenges from within both participating parties. Page withstood these by intervening in potentially divisive internal Country Party debates on strategy.

Following a series of instances of Nationalist and Country Party candidates contesting the same seats at state elections, Bruce and Page in 1924 sought to reaffirm the coalition by devising a further pact. Its central feature was an

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<sup>41</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party, op. cit.*, pp. 102-4. The Bruce-Page government's attempt to introduce tried grants for sewerage schemes in rural towns is also addressed in *Truant Surgeon, ibid.*, p. 189.

immunity clause discouraging such contests at the forthcoming 1925 federal election. This provided for each party to refrain from running a candidate in an electorate where there was already an incumbent from the other, and that in Labor-held seats the candidate should come from whichever party was strongest locally. If for some reason a seat still elicited candidates from both non-Labor parties, they were to exchange preferences. In effect, the Country Party was agreeing to limit its expansion to what seats it could win from the ALP. Both Page and Bruce threatened to resign from their respective party leaderships rather than drop the new pact. Serious opposition still came from within the AFFO and its membership of farmers' organisations, especially the radical faction of the VFU and associations in South Australia and Western Australia. One of the main complaints was that by upholding the coalition, Page was endangering the separate identity of the Country Party and committing it to an anti-Labor role.<sup>42</sup> The agreement was therefore amended to make exceptions for individual seats, but this did not prevent the disputatious Stewart from angrily resigning from Cabinet in August 1924 on the grounds that the pact restricted voters' choice by protecting sitting MPs. Page – a little ironically – was to later describe Stewart as “a brilliant man” who “possessed the defect of being too egotistical for protracted teamwork.”<sup>43</sup>

The attacks on Page over the 1924 pact were the most serious test that he had faced as party leader. This opposition was attributable in no small part to his having engineered the pact personally with Bruce and then proceeding to insist that the party accept it without change, just as he had the 1923 agreement. Page as an autocratic party leader was determined to fight for the coalition as a basis for pursuing his goals. In his defence, Page could decisively point to tangible gains that the Country Party had been able to deliver in coalition, such as abolition of federal land tax on Crown leaseholds, protection of rural industries, rural telephone services, the tied grants for roads and the Commonwealth Bank's Rural Credits Department.<sup>44</sup> Page told a party conference in Adelaide that it was no coincidence that Labor was in power in

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<sup>42</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 223-6.

<sup>43</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

<sup>44</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 227-8.

states which lacked a coalition.<sup>45</sup> His ability to see off challenges to his authority benefitted fortuitously from sizeable budget surpluses in 1922-23 to 1924-25 arising from higher than anticipated customs and excise revenue during a rare inter-war period of buoyancy.<sup>46</sup>

That the coalition survived such challenges is remarkable given the fractiousness of the early Country Party. The still formative federal party lacked a solid institutional basis for constraining a strong parliamentary leader, leaving Page to manage the relationship with the Nationalists. (The state country parties were often more tightly organised). This may help explain Page's power: opponents such as Stewart kept splitting away rather than having the option of organising opposition through an established party decision-making mechanism. Page flourished also because he successfully balanced his grander visions with concern to maintain the coalition, hence his caution about promoting new states and calculated acceptance of tariffs. The success of this first rural-urban federal coalition had a lasting impact on Australian politics and became a major factor in Page's long-term standing in the party. The scale of the government's win at the 1925 election helped Page consolidate his position as party leader and upholder of the coalition. The Nationalists won 11 extra seats and the Country Party one more. Page resisted lingering calls to end the coalition, and did not object when the Nationalists took two more seats in an expanded Cabinet. He successfully maintained the federal coalition right up to 1929, despite splits over Country Party autonomy in the Victorian and South Australian parties in 1926 and 1928 respectively.<sup>47</sup> The main point of contention that still could have ended the coalition, tariff policy, remained largely unaddressed.

Page also benefited in the eyes of the wider Country Party from the Bruce-Page government's identification with orderly marketing programs. The protection this provided to primary producers included tariffs on some food imports (such as maize, hops and sugar); subsidies on exports of high cost

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<sup>45</sup> Port Pirie *Recorder*, 10 September 1924, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Customs and excise constituted 61 per cent of total Commonwealth revenue in 1922-23 and over 70 per cent in 1924-5; Graham, *ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>47</sup> Davey, *Ninety Not Out*, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-9.

industries (such as dried and canned fruits); and Australian domestic parity prices for exports (notably dairy products). As Graham noted, some of these programs originated with the Hughes government, including subsidies for beef exports and the embargo on sugar imports, or were the result of concessions reluctantly made to pressure groups, such as subsidisation of canned fruit exports.<sup>48</sup> By early 1928, the Commonwealth Department of Markets was administering 15 federal Acts and nine producer boards and similar organisations.<sup>49</sup> The sole major agricultural industry not receiving governmental support was wool, which by commanding a strong position in international markets did not need further bolstering. The inter-war period was to see the creation of a complex web of Commonwealth and state support schemes for farm industries, operating mainly through high domestic prices and with only the strongly export-oriented wool and wheat industries generally receiving less effective assistance.<sup>50</sup>

Page's ambivalence about orderly marketing schemes made him a less consistent originator and advocate of these arrangements than were other senior Country Party figures. Especially prominent was his future deputy leader Thomas Paterson, who in 1925-26 originated the earliest significant such program, the eponymous Paterson voluntary dairy scheme. Page could be economical in crediting others, but in his memoirs paid full tribute to Paterson for this initiative.<sup>51</sup> Page's ambivalence was the basis of his 1924 agreement with Bruce that industry-led co-operative marketing schemes should pay their own way, leading to the government's refusal to sponsor a compulsory wheat pool. Although the Rural Credits Department that Page had

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<sup>48</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 228, 231.

<sup>49</sup> 'The Marketing of Primary Products: Statement from the Commonwealth Minister of Markets and Migration, Hon. T. Paterson', in *Supplement to The Economic Record*, February 1928, pp. 124-5.

<sup>50</sup> A.G. Lloyd, 'Agricultural Price Policy' in D.B. Williams (ed.), *Agriculture in the Australian Economy*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, second edition 1982 (first published 1967), pp. 359-60.

<sup>51</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, p. 132. The Paterson Scheme was voluntary in nature. It centred on dairy factories paying a levy on all butter they produced, generating funds that were then paid back as a bounty on the approximately one third of output that was exported. As the local market price was set during the export season at export parity, the scheme resulted in a rise in local consumer prices i.e. the other two thirds of sales, leading to a net gain for producers. See Lloyd, 'Agricultural Price Policy', in Williams, *ibid.*, p. 367. On Bruce's attitude to orderly marketing, see Richmond, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

established in 1925 extended grants to various voluntary co-operative pools, he personally rejected a system of compulsory pools co-ordinated by a federal authority, pointing to the strictures imposed by section 92 of the Constitution guaranteeing free trade between the states. This may have also reflected Nationalist Party reluctance to keep indulging its junior coalition partner: if so, it again illustrates that maintaining the coalition took priority for Page over the demands of the Country Party's more radical elements.<sup>52</sup>

### **Page and the Country Party: shifting policy authority**

In addition to successfully defending the coalition, Page consolidated his central role in policy formulation within the Country Party through changes to its national organisation. Bruce and Page's largely shared views on development made them politically closer to each other than to their respective parties. The stress in Page's memoirs on how well they worked together contrasts with the paucity of references to major policy being initiated by his own party colleagues. Both leaders formulated policy with only as much regard for their respective party rooms as was necessary. Page appears to have been frustrated by what he saw as the narrower visions of his colleagues, such as on new states and electrification. He was not especially close to his party deputy, W.G. Gibson, other than sharing an interest in rural communication and radio services. Drummond, who sat in the New South Wales legislature, remained his only real parliamentary confidant.

Yet Graham observed of Page that "no other person in the party was as widely known and respected, and he demanded – and obtained – that unquestioning loyalty which Australian farmers are accustomed to give their leaders."<sup>53</sup> Page used this status to play a decisive role in encouraging the state organisations to shift policy-making from the party's nascent national organisation to the federal parliamentary party. Page thereby became a great shaper of the Country Party, creating policy space for himself in the process. He had long held that major decisions on policy and strategy should be left to MPs, not the party

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<sup>52</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 228, 244.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.

organisation and outrider bodies. In 1924 he declared to the VFU that “a leader must give a lead” and “should not be expected to run to the rank and file for every little thing.”<sup>54</sup>

The main change that embedded Page’s policy authority was the replacement of the AFFO as the Party’s foremost national body by the creation of the Australian Country Party Association (ACPA) at a national conference of the Country Party and its allied organisations in Melbourne on 23 March 1926. Although the unity of all political parties was often tenuous in the 1920s – even an issue as seemingly innocuous as construction of a Sydney to Brisbane uniform gauge railway line led nine ALP parliamentarians and nine Nationalists to cross the floor of Federal Parliament in opposite directions – the Country Party was at first especially loosely organised.<sup>55</sup> AFFO support for any particular position, such as the 1925 electoral pact, was not decisive as it was essentially a confederation that formulated recommendations for approval by state bodies, which were themselves bound by respective constitutions.

As federal parliamentary party leader, Page did not have power over the AFFO, let alone the state organisations. In March 1925, for example, the AFFO demanded that the parliamentary party try to abolish high tariffs on agricultural machinery and introduce a compulsory wheat pool.<sup>56</sup> Page favoured a full reorganisation of the party and so at the March 1926 conference proposed an “amended organisation of the Australian Country Party so as to form a political organisation to which all electors whose sympathies are with the policy of the organisation may belong” (thereby also seeking to widen the party to include rural-based secondary industry).<sup>57</sup> At the time, Page was quoted as declaring that it was “essential to separate the industrial from the political activities of the Country Party.”<sup>58</sup> Page told Graham in an interview conducted in 1956 that one of his goals in creating the ACPA was a clearer institutional division between the party organisation and the federal parliamentary party, which would place

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>55</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 181. There was also a split over the 1926 tied road grants legislation, which was opposed by some Nationalists and only passed with Labor support.

<sup>56</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 284-5.

<sup>57</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

<sup>58</sup> *The Land*, 26 March 1926, p. 13.

formulation of policy and parliamentary strategy firmly with the latter.<sup>59</sup> In his memoirs, Page recalled that a stronger party organisation based on a federal structure would “give balance to the Party’s parliamentary policy”, but added the more immediate motivation of managing the rural radicals on the coalition issue, especially Stewart who in March 1926 formed a breakaway Country Party Progressive Group.<sup>60</sup>

Officials of state organisations had constituted the majority at AFFO conferences, but the constitution of the ACPA effectively institutionalised the dominance of the parliamentary party, especially in its provisions for the ACPA Central Council. These were drafted in 1926 and approved the following year, creating a Central Council consisting of the federal parliamentary leader, two other federal representatives and fourteen members elected from affiliated organisations. The role of federal parliamentarians was decisively enhanced by most of the organisations habitually appointing federal members as their representatives. Only eight delegates were needed to constitute a quorum, and the Central Council could appoint a smaller executive committee that needed only a quorum of three. The Council was obliged to frame policy based on the Party’s platform in consultation with the federal parliamentary party. The ACPA met on average only annually in its first few years of existence, leaving the energetic Page a free hand to continue to build his extensive network of personal contacts and defend the coalition strategy.<sup>61</sup> Further, Page was appointed ACPA chair in 1927 and held this position until his death.

The growing dominance of Page and the parliamentary party was reflected in the federal Country Party’s continued resistance to pressure from its supporting organisations and state bodies over tariffs. At a party meeting in February 1926 a motion on tariffs was put aside in favour of one calling for an inquiry into

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<sup>59</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

<sup>60</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, pp. 206-7. Page refers to this resignation being in July; most other sources, including Ellis and the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry on Stewart, state March; K. M. Haig-Muir, 'Stewart, Percy Gerald (1885–1931)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/stewart-percy-gerald-8669/text15161>, published first in hardcopy 1990, volume 12, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, 1990.

<sup>61</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 285-7.

their effects, which Page was obliged to pass to the Prime Minister. (This led to the Brigden inquiry into tariffs, described in the next chapter).<sup>62</sup> Similarly, in June 1927 the ACPA rejected a Western Australian motion for reduction of duties in favour of one calling for “all-round protection” as advocated by Page.<sup>63</sup>

Page thus effectively made his own rules in the Country Party while it was still malleable. This was not to last, with the bulk of the party over the next two decades developing and consolidating its own priorities. There is one other concluding point in considering Page’s role in government and party during the Bruce-Page years. After the government’s fall in October 1929, it was Page and not Bruce (who departed parliamentary politics in 1933) who maintained the principal developmentalist ideas that their government had upheld – Commonwealth-led co-ordination, an expressly national conception of development and planning, and the hope that development could be placed above party politics. An important aspect of Page’s significance in Australian history is that he drew on his largely happy experience of the Bruce-Page government to continue efforts to apply its precepts into the future.

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<sup>62</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-20.

<sup>63</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

**CHAPTER 5 – PAGE’S LAST YEARS IN THE BRUCE-PAGE  
GOVERNMENT: CHALLENGING THE NATION THROUGH PLANNING AND  
FEDERALISM**

During the latter 1920s and in the wake of the Cohen Royal Commission, Page shifted his attention from new states to trying to transform the nation through economic planning and the reform of federalism. His engagement with these was enlivened by the Bruce-Page government’s creation of the Development and Migration Commission (DMC) and determination to finally resolve fiscal relations with the states. Historians widely recognise that Page played a major role in negotiating the Financial Agreement of 1927. Less well widely appreciated is that it was a time of consolidation of his own broader ideas about planning and federalism.

Page’s commitment to national planning developed later than his other passions of regionalism, hydroelectricity and constitutional reform. He first expressed interest during the early 1920s, when as a thoughtful new parliamentarian he pondered ways to pursue the major themes of his August 1917 speech of decentralisation and the realisation of national potential. This nascent interest only gelled when the Bruce-Page government embarked on an institutionalised approach to planning by establishing the DMC in 1926. The principal task of this statutory authority was to appraise new development projects, but it also had a remarkably wide brief to investigate and attempt to guide the entire economy. Page upheld it as a working example of an expert agency that elevated development policy above party politics and used business leaders as advisers. Shortly after, Bruce and Page eliminated the vertical fiscal imbalance still dogging Australian federalism by using the Commonwealth’s fiscal power to force the states to accept the Financial Agreement. They followed this success with a last concerted effort to have the states agree to the national co-ordination of policies relating to electricity, transport, health and much else.

Page brought to each of these initiatives his characteristic energy and capacity for synthesis. For all his support for new states, he simultaneously advocated

both national and regional scales of policy action. National economic planning, in particular, became one of his main means of trying to establish efficient new industries based on primary goods and of locating these to vitalise rural communities. This chapter, covering the final years of the Bruce-Page government, explains his attraction to the DMC and planning amid related national debates over tariff policy, culminating in his attempt to have the DMC realise his hopes for regional development in the Clarence Valley. It also analyses his important tactical role in the overhaul of Commonwealth-state fiscal relations and in less successful efforts towards national policy co-ordination.

### **Page champions planned national development and the DMC**

The Country Party dabbled in planning as early as 1921 when it considered a “complete survey and calculation of the resources of the Commonwealth”, an idea that Page retained as the proper starting point for well-informed planning.<sup>1</sup> The following year he began the Country Party election policy speech with a declaration that “Australia has reached the period in her history when her greatest need is sound government on an organised plan, recognising the stern necessity for economy without crippling the development of our primary and secondary industries.”<sup>2</sup> As Treasurer, planning became a frequent feature of his early speeches, such as when he told the citizens of Dalby in southern Queensland in February 1924 of the need for a “national plan” for the development of “power, roads, borrowing and finance.”<sup>3</sup> These initial calls for planning were vaguely articulated – a sign that he was still developing his thoughts, for Page was not one to hold back once he had an idea fully formed to his own satisfaction. He was from 1925 speaking ringingly of the “supreme importance” of Commonwealth-state co-operation in developing “a national

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<sup>1</sup> Handwritten draft statement of Country Party policy (undated, but associated documents suggest 1921), Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, Box 1, folder 1.

<sup>2</sup> Speech published in *The Land*, 27 October 1922, p. 4, copy in EPP, folder 2623.

<sup>3</sup> Speech by Page 30 February 1924, EPP, folder 1624.

plan of development” covering transport, water use and much else.<sup>4</sup> He needed a working model, and so his interest settled on the DMC.

Page’s thinking on planning was almost certainly stimulated by Cabinet deliberations over February to May 1926 on the creation of the DMC. Although this unprecedented agency became involved in attempts to shape the domestic economy, it originated with Australia’s need to be seen to be better managing its participation in the Empire-wide strategy by which Britain responded to post-war unemployment and loss of overseas markets through promoting the export of capital and population to the Dominions. Australia’s receptiveness to British investment and migration was encouraged during these post-war years by urbanisation, industrialisation and ambitions for rural development.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the First World War, Australian immigration was largely the responsibility of the states. Following the 1921 Imperial Conference on Immigration, the British government’s *Empire Settlement Act 1922* established cost-sharing migration arrangements with the Dominions. In Australia, the Premiers’ Conference of the following year agreed that Bruce should approach the British to negotiate a nationwide assisted migration scheme, which he duly raised at the 1923 Imperial Conference. The resultant “£34 million” Migration Agreement signed with Britain in April 1925 aimed for 450,000 assisted British settlers within ten years.<sup>6</sup>

In its ambition, the Migration Agreement exceeded previous arrangements involving the Australian states or the Commonwealth government. It centred on provision of cheap loans to fund development and migration linked to land settlement schemes. The Australian government raised the loans, and shared interest costs with Britain and the states. Specific development projects proposed by a state – defined broadly to include public works, land purchases and subsidisation of farmers – required the approval of all three governments concerned before funding would be made available. This gave the

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<sup>4</sup> Page’s 1925 election Country Party policy speech, copy in Ellis papers, UNE Archives, A0811, Box 12, pp. 13, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Cochrane, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-2.

<sup>6</sup> Murray, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-8.

Commonwealth effective control over hitherto state-led migration and more firmly linked migration to national development policy.<sup>7</sup>

The DMC served as the means by which Australia fulfilled its Agreement obligations. Its approval was an essential condition of the Commonwealth's preparedness to fund a project. This met the concerns of British lenders that the funds they provided on often generous terms would be well used and not lead to over-borrowing. Page later wrote of how "never in the history of Empire relationships were more liberal [financial] terms offered to the Australian people", which he was determined to honour and thereby maintain.<sup>8</sup> DMC tutelage improved the likelihood of the Migration Agreement being extended by encouraging the better informed use of land and public funds that expanded capacity to absorb migrants. In doing so it also provided a model for planning based on the rigorous assessment of economic viability, use of advisors external to government and co-operation between levels of government.

The DMC was not Page's creation. It owed more to Bruce, supported by suggestions from the newspaper proprietor Sir Hugh Denison and also from Australia's representative in the British Foreign Office, Richard Casey, who in turn referenced the British Committee of Civil Research.<sup>9</sup> Introducing the DMC Bill into parliament, the Prime Minister said that Australia had failed to face the problem of development, having "never had a stocktaking of our resources with a view to determining the industries that, having regard to our natural advantages, should be promoted." Hence now "there must be a thorough and impartial examination of every scheme before it is approved."<sup>10</sup> To such ends, the DMC had a near limitless brief to report on the Australian economy. It

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<sup>7</sup> The Agreement's complex origins are surveyed in Roe, *Australia, Britain, and Migration 1915-1940*, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-57; see also Eric Richards, *Destination Australia: Migration to Australia Since 1901*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2008, p. 92; and Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 188. For a fuller summary of the provisions of the Migration Agreement, see Roe, pp. 57-8.

<sup>8</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 188. There may also have been a concern to formally distance immigration from party politics, especially as there were indications that support for high levels of intake risked being held against the government; see Roe, *ibid.*, pp. 64-8, on the motivations for establishment of the DMC.

<sup>9</sup> Roe, *ibid.*, pp. 64-5.

<sup>10</sup> Development and Migration Commission, *First Annual Report for Period Ending 30 June 1927*, Commonwealth of Australia, Melbourne, 1927, pp. 5-6, EPP, folder 2322; and Roe, *ibid.*, p. 67.

could investigate the establishment of new primary and secondary industries and conduct negotiations for the development of existing ones. It even had legislated provision for “such other powers and functions as are prescribed,” that classic catchall.<sup>11</sup> (Page no doubt approved. His sense of urgency invariably blunted his appreciation of checks and balances).

The DMC sat apart from the mainstream of the Commonwealth public service as a legislated body corporate. It made extensive use of expert advisers from the business world. Herbert Gepp was appointed DMC Chair and C.S. Nathan Vice-Chair, both business leaders with strong reputations for innovation and vision. Balance and wider acceptability was provided by the other two commissioners, former South Australian Labor Premier John Gunn and New South Wales public servant E.P. Fleming.<sup>12</sup> The DMC worked closely with Australia’s newly emergent coterie of academic economists such as D.B. Copland, despite their tendency to be sceptical of migration and Australia’s development potential.<sup>13</sup> Page’s habitual hope that expert opinion would validate his plans led him to initially welcome the DMC’s use of policy experts. He was to be disappointed when their rigour was applied to his plans for the Clarence Valley.

The DMC stressed efficiency, especially the more productive use of land through improved technology and management, but not Page’s regionalism or electrification. Although it required ministerial approval to investigate broad development issues (while being free to initiate inquiries into specific projects), its Chair proclaimed an expansive interpretation of its role. Shortly after his appointment, the blunt, assertive Gepp declared the DMC “the national clearing house for all ideas and schemes bearing upon economic development”, with a responsibility to “co-ordinate the whole of the developmental activities of

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<sup>11</sup> *Development and Migration Act 1926*, Section 13 (1) (a) (vi).

<sup>12</sup> Gepp was an energetic, if enigmatic, figure whose wide-ranging engagement with public policy included a central role in establishing the CSIR; see Roe, *Australia, Britain, and Migration 1915-1940*, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-71.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91, 112.

Australia.”<sup>14</sup> He shared the Bruce-Page stress on national efficiency. Late in his tenure he told a University of Melbourne audience that “problems of organisation lie at the root of Australia’s economic difficulties” and that “the Commission plays its part by ascertaining and stating the facts” in “the application of science to industry and the consequent increase in efficiency.”<sup>15</sup>

Page’s own approach to planning owed much to a simple but strongly held model. In brief, he considered that as the secondary and primary sectors were interdependent, each should be managed so as to generate incomes that maintained demand for the other’s output. The prices of secondary and primary products needed to be brought into an alignment that maintained this mutually supportive demand and so kept the whole economy in balance. Farm prices and profitability were critical to determining demand for secondary goods, placing primary industries at the crucial centre of the economy. There was also an important place for competitive manufacturing based on Australia’s natural advantage in raw materials. Efficient secondary industry would also help support primary production by supplying capital equipment cheaply. This all owed much to Page’s sense of economic and social orderliness, with everything playing its proper and reinforcing role. Making the best use of factors of production of capital, labour and management was to Page reminiscent of the brain, heart, stomach and hands of the human body all “performing different functions and yet vital to the efficient work of the whole.”<sup>16</sup>

Page’s fullest statement of such views was his speech to the Chamber of Manufactures of New South Wales on 21 June 1926, just one month after the creation of the DMC. Published as *Australian Industries – The Interdependence of ‘Primary’ and ‘Secondary’*, it set out the implications of Page’s model for development policy and planning. Page thought the economy

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<sup>14</sup> Memo by Gepp on the DMC, 17 November 1926, NAA, CP211/2, 57/7, D & M Commission – Its Constitution and Functions – Memorandum by Mr Gepp. This file contains professionally printed copies of this memo, clearly meant for wide distribution.

<sup>15</sup> From an address to the Public Questions Society, University of Melbourne, April 1929, reproduced in Herbert Gepp, *Democracy’s Danger: Addresses on Various Occasions*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1939, pp. 34-5.

<sup>16</sup> Earle Page, *Australian Industries – The Interdependence of ‘Primary’ and ‘Secondary’*, Simmons Ltd, Sydney, 1926, copy at EPP, folder 2331, p. 7.

could be neatly driven by a few vital sectoral linkages to remain in perpetual motion, and tied together planning, decentralisation, electrification and industrial standardisation.<sup>17</sup> He opened this talk by summarising how the economy's component sectors could support each other:

Manufacturers are interested in the primary producers as the suppliers of their raw material and as the purchasers of their finished goods. The more efficiently the manufacturers fulfil their function of supplying the tools specially adapted for the producer's work and articles for the producer's use, the more readily and cheaply can be supplied the raw materials for manufacturing processes. The more profit there is in agricultural industries, the more readily can manufactured goods be bought.<sup>18</sup>

A sound home market was the basis for an industry to become internationally competitive, especially manufacturing. Use of abundant raw materials to manufacture competitive goods would lead to an even split in total exports between manufactures and "raw products", so that primary industry would not be left disproportionately supporting the nation's standard of living.<sup>19</sup> Here lay the role of planning. Government failure to "lay down a definite plan of development" along these lines was handicapping industry. Planning should start with transport and power production "conceived on a national scale", and support decentralisation by enabling the disposition of factories at strategic points. Page gave vent here to his impatience with federalism – Australians must stop "blindly worshipping the fetish of State rights." "It is idle" he said loftily, "for those who profess to believe that such action infringes State rights to try and put the hands of the clock back."<sup>20</sup>

Page's brief coverage here of the orderly marketing of rural produce portrayed it as a means of maintaining demand for manufactures. It would help "create a continuous purchasing power of finished goods in the hands of the producer", so that "both primary and secondary industries thus tend to be stabilised and a

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* See also 'Speech Given by Dr. Earle Page at the Constitutional Association 15/2/32 on the Tariff', EPP, folder 384, and his speech to the House of 17 July 1930, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, pp. 4248-63.

<sup>18</sup> Page, *Australian Industries*, *ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 9, 10-11, 12, 19.

beneficial circle of regular employment in all callings is created.”<sup>21</sup> To Page, orderly marketing did not constitute an absolute end in itself, but was a subsidiary policy tool with a place in his wider conception of the economy.

One wonders what Page’s audience of manufacturing executives thought as they were exhorted to ponder this very big picture of “well-balanced national progress.”<sup>22</sup> They probably saw more relevance in his comments about standardising industrial capital equipment to aid mass production. Page also expressed some of his Prime Minister’s concern about the consequences of high wages for international competitiveness, but hastened to add that greater efficiency could overcome this problem and also lead to increased real wages. There should also be a rationalisation of parallel state and national arbitration into a single Commonwealth-led system – the very issue that was to fell the Bruce-Page government in 1929.<sup>23</sup>

Capital, transport, power, standardisation, tariffs, marketing, finance and regulation – “a well-conceived plan of efficiency must consider the place of all these in the national economy.” Page did not specify in this 1926 speech how such planning would be conducted. But he made clear his confidence that he could work with business leaders “to create the public opinion that would assist these desirable policies.” Manufacturers should even be trusted to nominate what assistance they needed to obtain the best capital machinery.<sup>24</sup> Press coverage of the speech was mostly supportive, but focussed on Page’s comments on federalism. One report saw it as indicative of “the orderly soul of Dr Page” and particularly noted his comment that in the distant past problems of government had been left to “mediocrities” but that now, he had declared, “the time has come for the best minds to take a hand in governmental operations.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 9, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Editorial in the *Adelaide Register* of 22 June 1926, p. 8. The *Register* described the audience of manufacturers as having listened “dutifully.” Some later Page initiatives on efficient manufacturing fell foul of opposition from manufacturers fearing exposure to international competition; see chapter six for a description of Page’s abortive Anglo-Australian electrification initiative of 1936. The *Register’s* main objection was that Page’s comments about efficiency

Tariffs occupied an especially important place in how Page saw the economy being planned: his views on this drew him into the main economic policy debate of the 1920s. Free traders foresaw a primary industry-orientated Australia that was robustly competitive on world markets. Protectionists envisaged a more self-contained nation that developed on its own social and economic terms, including by fostering a large (albeit costly) manufacturing sector.

Historians have frequently commented on Page's encouragement of primary producers to accept tariff increases on manufactures in the name of the broader economic and political benefits of "all-round protection."<sup>26</sup> What is less widely appreciated is that as an advocate of planning, he kept a foot in each of the free trade and protectionist camps by generally being critical of tariffs but also supporting their planned use to nurture carefully chosen industries in decentralised locations – 'picking winners', in latter-day parlance. He was neither free trader nor ardent protectionist. Page considered "natural and essential" industries in which Australia was internationally competitive worthy of nurturing – mostly resource-based industries and related manufacturing such as of agricultural machinery, but also some orientated to mass consumption.<sup>27</sup> Tariffs could be powerful tools if used in a "scientific" way that reflected a comprehensive review of "the whole national position and national resources."<sup>28</sup>

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were an attack on the rights of states. Coverage in other newspapers was more favourable, such as the Perth *Daily News* of 22 June 1926, p. 4 and the Adelaide *Advertiser* of 22 June 1926, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 231, 246-7. The average tariff rate rose from about 10 per cent in 1918 to about 27 per cent in 1927; see William Oliver Coleman, Selwyn Cornish and Alfred Hagger, *Giblin's Platoon: The Trials and Triumph of the Economist in Australian Public Life*, ANU E Press, Canberra, 2006, p. 66.

<sup>27</sup> Earle Page, *Australian Industries*, *op. cit.*, p. 17; see also 'Speech Given by Dr. Earle Page at the Constitutional Association 15/2/32 on the Tariff', *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> Page, *Australian Industries*, *ibid.*, p. 17. The term scientific tariffs was not unique to Bruce and Page, but was widely used by economists of the time; see Joanne Pemberton, 'The Middle Way: The Discourse of Planning in Britain, Australia and at the League in the Interwar Years', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 52, no.1, 2006, p. 57. Similarly, the Australian trade adviser in Britain, F.L. McDougall, and George Julius, Chair of CSIR, both also advocated a selective tariff policy that enabled free entry for manufactures which could not be efficiently made in Australia, such as electrical goods; see W.J. Hudson and Wendy Way (eds.), *Letters From A Secret Service Agent: F.L. McDougall to S.M. Bruce 1924-1929*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1986, pp. 361-5.

The burden that tariffs imposed on primary industries remained a major, if inconsistently pursued, concern of the Country Party. The early federal parliamentary Country Party and state party associations were not united on the tariff issue: V.C. Thompson, for example, was a protectionist.<sup>29</sup> In his memoirs Page makes clear that the Country Party was opposed to the levels of protection imposed by the Massy Green tariff but was willing to countenance duties recommended by the Tariff Board for “any worthwhile industry which could satisfy local needs and ultimately enter expert markets.” Failure to reduce the Massy Green tariff was a factor in the orderly marketing schemes supported by the Bruce-Page government, “to enable the survival of primary industries, to provide them with reasonable conditions, and to assist the expansion of export markets.”<sup>30</sup>

Page’s only very selective opposition to tariffs raised tension with some of his political allies. H.P. Williams, manager of the influential New South Wales-wide rural newspaper *The Land*, berated him in March 1923 for countenancing tariffs to support sugar manufacturing.<sup>31</sup> In a 1924 letter to the Sydney-based manufacturer George Hoskins, Page vented his disgust at “the idiocy of protecting a lot of fourth rate industries instead of making sure that the essential and basic ones that we can properly develop and get a market for were thoroughly protected to begin with.” This left him disdainful of the Commonwealth Tariff Board for lacking a strong sense of which industries should be nurtured.<sup>32</sup>

Statements by Page such as his speech to the New South Wales manufacturers made him a participant in the growing policy debate over the tariff that extended through the decade. Amongst Australia’s increasingly vocal band of policy-minded academic economists, Copland and E.O. Shann were

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<sup>29</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, pp. 153-4, 229-31. Graham speculates that lower tariffs could have reduced federal revenue and pushed Page as Treasurer towards the unpalatable alternative of raising taxes.

<sup>30</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon. op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>31</sup> H.P. Williams to Page, 6 March 1923, EPP, folder 1151 (part ii). Williams wanted the sugar industry to first establish a voluntary pool.

<sup>32</sup> Page to George Hoskins, undated but in reply to a letter of 17 May 1924, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, Box 10, folder 80.

free traders: L.F. Giblin was more accepting of protection. Bruce was aware of this debate and broadly agreed with Page that a moderate tariff should be applied cautiously according to scientific precepts. To this end, he commissioned the celebrated 1929 enquiry into tariffs headed by the Tasmanian-based economist James Brigden that became the most comprehensive analysis of Australian protectionism to date.

The Brigden Enquiry arrived at a politically cautious conclusion that the level of tariff assistance stood at an optimal level, a compromise between committee members who advocated free trade and those favouring protectionism. Brigden himself became the foremost proponent of tariffs as improving the overall standard of living by their promotion of employment in manufacturing at acceptable wage levels and by supporting population growth. Like Page, Brigden considered tariffs in the context of the interaction of primary and secondary industries, but from a far more scholarly and theoretical perspective than did the avowedly practical Country Party leader.<sup>33</sup> Yet despite Page's disinterest in theory, it was still highly unusual then or later for a politician to view the tariff question in terms of such a full model of the economy and vision of the entire country. Page did not argue the pros and cons of tariffs wholly in terms that much later became standard – he made no reference, for example, to tariffs effectively imposing flat taxes on consumers. As an early and relatively sophisticated tariff critic, Page went well beyond mainstream Country Party concerns about the added costs of capital equipment to arrive at a carefully nuanced vision of their place in the nation's development. By considering what implications tariffs posed for national efficiency, he challenged his colleagues to consider the wider impact of protectionism and helped presage future nation-changing debates on industry restructuring.

Page was also ahead of his time from the mid-1920s by making private investment a major element of his thinking on implementing major public works, especially for electrification. (One of the few other prominent advocates was

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<sup>33</sup> The Brigden Enquiry was formally titled *The Australian Tariff: An Economic Enquiry*. For a fuller account, see Coleman, Cornish and Hagger, *op. cit.*, chapter four; see also Millmow, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-9, and Moore in Walter, *op. cit.*, pp. 162-3.

Frederic Eggleston in his 1932 *State Socialism in Victoria*, but for different reasons).<sup>34</sup> For most of Page's career, important infrastructure was almost entirely built and operated by state governments, especially after the Great War. He advocated private investment as more likely to take a longer perspective than would typically characterise the choices of short-lived governments. Private investors could construct dams and power stations in return for charters and franchise arrangements that guaranteed their rights to operate these facilities for a set long-term period. Page wanted "a uniform continent-wide policy that will keep in mind the requirements of national development while at the same time provide every means and facility for private enterprise to carry out this work."<sup>35</sup> He does not seem to have ever reconciled his proposal to charge all electricity consumers the same flat rate with attracting private operators.<sup>36</sup>

### **Page and planned development: attempting to transform the Clarence**

Soon after its creation, the DMC optimistically foresaw itself as a "detached body," free to enter into "full co-operation" with state governments. It would be their adviser as they worked together to populate the continent, and urged the states to appoint counterpart Development Commissioners.<sup>37</sup> In practice, the states tended to view the DMC as a menace to their favoured proposals. It became especially suspicious of ambitious irrigation projects: Queensland proceeded with the Dawson Valley Irrigation Scheme alone, with unhappy

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<sup>34</sup> Frederic Eggleston, *State Socialism in Victoria*, P.S. King & Son, London, 1932, pp. 13-4, 304-5. Eggleston drew on his unhappy personal experience in Victorian state politics in concluding that publicly owned essential services were inefficient.

<sup>35</sup> 'Federal Power Commission', EPP, folders 1625 and 2088; no date, but wording and the inclusion of a copy amongst papers prepared for the May 1929 Premiers Conference suggest it was prepared for this conference.

<sup>36</sup> Page frequently called for stronger constitutional guarantees of private property rights so as to encourage private investment in infrastructure. Section 51(xxxi) of the Constitution gives the Commonwealth power to make laws on "the acquisition of property on just terms from any State or person for any purpose in respect of which the Parliament has power to make laws." High Court interpretation of "acquisition" and of "just terms" has limited this protection of property rights; and the requirement concerning a "purpose in respect of which the Parliament has power to make laws" is taken to mean that legislation based on 51 (xxxi) must be supported by at least one additional constitutional power.

<sup>37</sup> Development and Migration Commission, *First Annual Report*, *op. cit.*, p. 6; A.J. Davies, 'Australian Federalism and National Development', *The Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 14, no. 1, April 1968, p. 41.

results.<sup>38</sup> The DMC did not directly enter into the fierce debates of the Bruce-Page years over union power and arbitration, but its association with high migration and calls for greater efficiency to overcome rising production costs drew criticism from organised labour. The federal opposition leader Matthew Charlton attacked it in parliament and spoke of migrants as “largely responsible” for unemployment.<sup>39</sup>

The DMC nonetheless operated widely and confidently, undertaking studies ranging from the dried fruit and tobacco industries to transport costs, national employment and “the present position of Tasmania.” It proudly reported that most of its recommendations on project funding were taken up by the Commonwealth.<sup>40</sup> Yet the DMC never entirely fulfilled a national economic planning role, the Commonwealth lacking the necessary constitutional powers and the Bruce-Page government not wanting to dictate to private industry. The closest it came to a comprehensive stocktake of the economy was a listing in its 1928 annual report of Australia’s main imports, intended as a first step towards identifying new industries for development. The DMC was in practice more productive in assessing promising new targets for assistance on a project-by-project basis.<sup>41</sup>

Bruce and Page’s enthusiasm for the DMC suggests they were aware of the need to manage such constraints to growth as shortages of good land and dubious irrigation schemes. Soon after the DMC’s creation, Page became an advocate of its permanent enshrinement in national policy. He encouraged his own party to endorse planning, and invited state Country Party leaders to an ACPA meeting in June 1927 where he lectured them on state co-operation in “the initiation of a national plan of efficiency in production and marketing that will ensure balanced development”. He credited the DMC and the CSIR with

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<sup>38</sup> Roe, *Australia, Britain, and Migration 1915-1940*, *op. cit.*, pp. 97, 112-3.

<sup>39</sup> Charlton, 23 February 1928, quoted in Roe, *ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>40</sup> Development and Migration Commission, *First Annual Report*, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>41</sup> Development and Migration Commission, *Second Annual Report for Period Ending 31<sup>st</sup> December 1928*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1929, pp.11-2, EPP, folder 2322; for a summary of the DMC’s research see Roe, *Australia, Britain, and Migration 1915-1940*, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-3. The rationale for identifying imports was that a high level of importation was considered suggestive of a solid local demand.

furthering state-federal co-ordination but “the work is only just begun.” Tellingly, he failed to offer a convincing rationale of how to implement all of this beyond offering old ideas about national power and port development, uniform rail charges and flat electricity rates.<sup>42</sup>

Page’s confidence in the DMC culminated in his attempt to use it to realise regional development and electrification in the Clarence Valley. The DMC agreed to his request to look closely at the Clarence region as a candidate for Migration Agreement funding of an entire package of linked projects – hydroelectricity at The Gorge and Jackadgery, and related flood prevention, road, rail, port, timber and mining initiatives. The detailed account preserved in the National Archives of Australia of the resultant probing of Page’s faith that electrification would create its own demand demonstrates that the DMC was every bit as rigorous as he otherwise wanted it to be.

Following the defeat of the first Lang Government, which had stood out of the Migration Agreement, Page’s home state of New South Wales finally signed on in March 1928. That month he approached Gepp about his comprehensive plan to develop the Clarence Valley. The DMC Chair responded that if preliminary investigations were favourable, the Commission could work with the state government on what “would be just the sort of scheme that he [Gepp] knew the British government would view favourably, as it would lead to large development and increased population.”<sup>43</sup> Page followed up by sending Gepp a copy of his 1919 booklet *The Clarence Gorge Hydro-Electric Scheme*, which a DMC economist cautioned the Chair had clearly “not been prepared by technical men.”<sup>44</sup> Pressure also came from The Port of the Clarence Advisory Board, a local lobby group chaired by Page’s Country Party colleague Alf Pollack.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Speech reproduced in *The Primary Producer* of 9 June 1927, p. 1, copy in EPP, folder 2666.

<sup>43</sup> Memo by C. Tye (Under-Secretary of the New South Wales Department of Public Works), 8 March 1928, NAA, CP211/2, 34/13, Investigations – New South Wales – Hydro Electric Scheme (Clarence River): 1928. Tye was reporting on Page’s approach to Gepp.

<sup>44</sup> Memo E.N. Robinson to Gepp, 30 March 1928, *ibid*.

<sup>45</sup> Letter from The Port of the Clarence Advisory Board to Premier Bavin, 16 February 1928, *ibid*.

The DMC duly dispatched its new Deputy Chair, W.P. Devereux, a former pastoral industry executive, on appraisal tours of the region in July and August 1928. Page telegraphed Devereux that although the various projects proposed for the region “must be regarded as a whole”, if there had to be a choice hydroelectricity should take priority.<sup>46</sup> Page, with Pollack and others, insisted on accompanying Devereux for part of his second tour, including a visit on horseback to The Gorge. Devereux’s detailed on-the-road reports to Gepp show him to have been a cautious observer, well capable of resisting Page’s pressure. He concluded that a power project at Jackadgery had some merit provided the state government was supportive, but that The Gorge would produce far more power than was needed locally and inundate too much good land.<sup>47</sup> The Bavin-Buttenshaw state government accepted at this time a Commonwealth proposal that it should also investigate The Gorge, resulting in similar findings by its Chief Electrical Engineer, H.G. Carter.<sup>48</sup>

Premier Bavin soon agreed with Devereux that The Gorge project should not proceed.<sup>49</sup> In March 1929 the state government added that Jackadgery was also too costly, and elected instead to explore more modest proposals such as extending the Nymboida facility.<sup>50</sup> Page made similarly fruitless inquiries with potential British investors. A contact of his reported back in December 1929 that they thought the thin distribution of the Australian population made new hydroelectric installations commercially unviable, and would only consider projects securely backed by Australian governments.<sup>51</sup> The DMC meanwhile continued to assess the wider development of the Clarence Valley, but had not reached any final conclusion by the time of its abolition in 1930.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Page telegram to Devereux, 10 July 1928, *ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Devereux memo to Gepp, 23 July 1928, *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Earle Page, *Clarence River Hydro-Electric Gorge Scheme*, The Bulletin Newspaper Co. Ltd., Sydney, undated but printer’s invoices in the EPP, folder 1078 part (ii), show that it appeared in August 1944, pp. 17-8. Carter thought that that the project was too large for immediate development but had longer term potential.

<sup>49</sup> Devereux memo to Gepp, 23 July 1928, *op. cit.*

<sup>50</sup> ‘Extract from Summary Report No 12, Dated 28<sup>th</sup> March 1929’, NAA, A786, R22/1, Development NSW Clarence Valley.

<sup>51</sup> Fred Sandman (? , signature unclear) to Page, 1 December 1928, EPP, folder 2083.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Clarence Gorge Development – History of Investigations and Offers of Assistance from Three Federal Governments and Seven State Governments’, c.1954, EPP, folder 1798.

This episode was an early instance not only of technical advice constraining Page but also of the caution of state governments that would actually have borne responsibility for his various schemes. It was an early indicator of the direction in which policy advising on development projects was shifting. Even in this decade of developmentalist optimism, there was a countervailing awareness of the limitations imposed by Australia's settlement patterns and natural environment that gestured towards concerns most clearly articulated by Griffith Taylor. As the foremost historian of assisted migration between the wars has concluded, the DMC's "dominant message had been that by capitalism's own standards, Australia offered little scope for productive development."<sup>53</sup>

Page also came under pressure via the equally dispassionate scrutiny of the engineering profession. Australian engineers in the early 1920s had been divided over the potential of hydroelectricity, with Corin, the hydroengineer who had surveyed the Nymboida and The Gorge, being its main protagonist. In a 1920 study he declared that the water resources of New South Wales were grossly underutilized, and that the growth of Tasmanian manufacturing showed what was possible if hydroelectricity was applied intelligently.<sup>54</sup> But as the decade progressed, a majority opinion emerged amongst engineers and economists that hydroelectricity was of marginal significance on the mainland.

This conclusion drew on recent debates such as that in Victoria over brown coal versus hydroelectricity. John Monash stated in 1924 that "water power" was not necessarily cheaper than thermal generation and that Australian stream flows were unreliable.<sup>55</sup> W.H. Myers, Chief Electrical Engineer for New South Wales Railways and Tramways, made a thinly veiled attack on Page and Corin at the March 1929 conference of the Institution of Engineers. He assailed "wild deductions" by "recently-returned travellers from abroad...that the salvation of the country depends upon the development of 'hydroelectricity' or of 'super-power' schemes", and of how "even electrical engineers, including

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<sup>53</sup> Roe, *Australia, Britain, and Migration 1915-1940*, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

<sup>54</sup> 'Report of the Chief Electrical Engineer, Department of Public Works', 1920, EPP, folder 1046. (This report is extracted from the 1919-20 Annual Report of the New South Wales Department of Public Works).

<sup>55</sup> Monash, Presidential Address to the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science, Adelaide, 25 August 1924, *op. cit.*

some of standing, occasionally are not immune from the same habit.” Myers deflated simplistic comparisons with the United States by pointing out that Australia’s potential hydroelectricity sources were remote from population centres and that population dispersal inhibited the interlinking of power systems.<sup>56</sup> A September 1929 report to the Australian government by consulting engineer Alex J. Gibson was particularly telling, for Gibson was a decentralist who considered agriculture “the ultimate wealth of any community.” He challenged assumptions that hydroelectricity was inexpensive and that power availability alone would create new manufacturing or serve as “the panacea for all the ills from which the [agricultural] industry suffers”, especially given the dispersal of farms. Gibson predicted, largely accurately, that Australia’s future power development would be predominantly coal-based.<sup>57</sup>

None of these critiques altered Page’s faith in hydroelectricity nor his hopes for his home region. He so habitually contrived to interpret expert findings positively that he took the DMC’s and Carter’s cautious conclusions to imply that inadequate local demand could be solved at a stroke by linking The Gorge to a Newcastle-Brisbane transmission system. Corin died in 1929, leaving Page alone as Australia’s most prominent advocate of hydroelectricity and the main agent by which the concept lingered as a policy issue prior to its resurgence via the Snowy Scheme.

### **Page and co-operative federalism: the success of the Financial Agreement**

As the 1920s progressed, changes in external financial conditions strengthened the case for a stronger Loan Council than the existing voluntary arrangement. Britain’s return to the gold standard in 1925 created obstacles to lending abroad and raised interest rates: unease about public debt included a growing

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<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Alexander J. Gibson, *Report on Power Development in Australia*, Government Printer, Canberra, September 1929, p. 33; all the following quotes are from pp. 3, 33-40. See also Walter Harold Myers, *The Supply of Electricity in Bulk*, Institution of Engineers Australia, Sydney, 1929. Myers had been a school colleague of Page at Sydney Boys High; see *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>57</sup> Gibson, *ibid*, pp. 35, 37, 39. EPP folder 1049 contains a synopsis by Gibson of this report.

suspicion in international circles that Australia was an unreliable borrower.<sup>58</sup> Conversion activity and the ongoing quest for new loans meant that an Australian government was almost always active in the international loan market.<sup>59</sup> More fundamentally, Bruce and Page continued to see vertical fiscal imbalance and the duplication of functions between Commonwealth and states as affronts to their sense of efficiency. As both were conscious of the failure of referenda as means of change, their strategy remained one of negotiating co-operative agreements with the states.<sup>60</sup>

This resumed with a new offer to the states at the May 1926 Premiers' Conference. Bruce and Page proposed that the Commonwealth withdraw from all forms of direct taxation and discontinue the per capita grants, in return for which it would take over state debts. As in 1923, Bruce led for the Commonwealth in debate, with Page supporting by answering the assembled Premiers' numerous doubts about details. Page denied that he and Bruce were out to impose unification. Their aim was a rationalisation of intergovernmental finance that would be in everyone's interest, "to secure federation to [*sic*] the Australian states for all time, and to insist that there shall be a proper Federal basis which will assuredly be brought about if there be a distinct separation of their finances."<sup>61</sup> Yet the states again rejected the Commonwealth's proposal, being reluctant to levy unpopular direct taxes alone and foreseeing that a future Labor government could restore Commonwealth taxation.<sup>62</sup>

In June, Page with Bruce's support issued a final demand to the states that "the vicious principle of one authority raising taxation for another authority to spend"

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<sup>58</sup> C.G. Headford, 'The Australian Loan Council – Its Origin, Operation and Significance in the Federal Structure', in W. Prest and R.L. Mathews (eds.), *The Development of Australian Fiscal Federalism: Selected Readings*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1980, pp. 165-6, (article first published 1954).

<sup>59</sup> Radi, *op. cit.*, p. 386.

<sup>60</sup> Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 35. When they took office in 1923, only two of thirteen referendum questions put to the voters so far had been approved. The Bruce-Page government held two referendums, one in September 1926 on corporations and industrial relations powers that included giving the Commonwealth authority to deal with interruptions to essential services; and that of November 1928 on the Financial Agreement.

<sup>61</sup> 'Conference of the Commonwealth and State Ministers Held at Federal Parliament House Melbourne, May 1926 to Consider the Financial Relations Between the States and the Commonwealth – Report of Debates', EPP, folder 2663, part iii.

<sup>62</sup> Mathews and Jay, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

must cease.<sup>63</sup> Page added a more personal argument that the remission of direct taxation to the states would prevent them from being financially strangled by the Commonwealth and so at risk of *de facto* unification.<sup>64</sup> Legislation was enacted to reduce (but not quite eliminate) Commonwealth direct taxes and to abolish the per capita grants in favour of distributing only any remaining Commonwealth surplus on a per capita basis. The *States Grants Act 1927* was effectively an ultimatum that the states had one year to agree to a mutually acceptable formula or else have the Commonwealth impose its own resolution.<sup>65</sup> Bruce acceded to state appeals to delay implementation, and a draft of what became the Financial Agreement was negotiated at further Premiers' Conferences before an agreed text was signed by all governments on 12 December 1927. The subsequent referendum of November 1928 approved the insertion of section 105A into the Constitution to enable the Commonwealth to implement the Agreement.<sup>66</sup> Despite a 'yes' result in every state, the Labor Party, Percy Stewart and one Nationalist (E.A. Mann) voted in parliament against the enabling bill.<sup>67</sup>

The Financial Agreement in its final form abolished per capita payments to the states in return for the Commonwealth taking over existing and future state debts, but with the states joining it in contributing to debt servicing. The Commonwealth withdrew from most direct taxation and the Loan Council was accorded binding authority over borrowing by both levels of government.<sup>68</sup> The

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<sup>63</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 4 June 1926, p. 2682.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2680.

<sup>65</sup> Mathews and Jay, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

<sup>66</sup> The vote was an almost unprecedented 74 per cent in favour, evidently as the voting public was opposed to more government debt; see Mathews and Jay, *ibid.*, p. 109. But note at chapter eight, footnote 108, of this thesis Page's later reflections on the basis for this vote.

<sup>67</sup> And two Country Party MPs indicated they voted for it only in deference to the referendum results; Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 160-1.

<sup>68</sup> The full Financial Agreement was a very complex document. In addition to taking over formal responsibility for the existing and future public debt of the states, the Commonwealth also agreed to make grants to the states for 58 years from 1927 of fixed amounts equal to the per capita grants to each state in 1926-27, but with the proviso that these were to be contributions to interest charges on the then existing public debt of the states. The Commonwealth would also make annual contributions to the National Debt Sinking Fund in respect of state debt. These contributions consisted of the equivalent of 0.125 per cent of existing debt as of 30 June 1927 for a period of 58 years; and 0.25 per cent of the face value of loans raised subsequently for 53 years from the date the debt was incurred (other than loans raised to meet revenue deficits). The states were also required to make contributions to meeting their debts, but at different rates (and somewhat different again for New South Wales). See Mathews and Jay, *op. cit.*, pp. 108, 121, and the *Financial Agreement Act 1928*.

states' assessment that their new borrowings would increase more than their populations had led them to conclude that Commonwealth contributions under such a repayment-based arrangement would exceed the old per capita grants.<sup>69</sup>

The most lasting reform, and that which Page took most to heart, was the change in status of the Loan Council. Page played a significant tactical role in the machinations that led to its elevation to a binding decision-making body dominated by the Commonwealth, marking a decisive shift in the locus of fiscal power. The Council would henceforth control all new public borrowing by determining annually the total proposed loan programs of the Commonwealth and the states, and judging whether these could be met at reasonable terms and conditions. This total would be divided up between governments by unanimous agreement. The Commonwealth would arrange all borrowing including conversions, redemptions and debt consolidation. Crucially, the Council's voting formula gave the Commonwealth a dominant say – it had two votes and a casting vote, as against each state's single vote.<sup>70</sup> Lacking a secretariat, its deliberations were conducted in secret by heads of government, treasurers and officials.

The Financial Agreement was the most comprehensive reform of federalism to that date, and a testament to Bruce and Page's determination to rectify a gross inefficiency. In one move, they had addressed three major concerns – co-ordination of public borrowing, debt reduction and vertical fiscal imbalance.<sup>71</sup> Looking back in 1957, Page accurately described the Agreement as still “the single major substantial alteration in the Constitution.”<sup>72</sup> W.K. Hancock, writing four decades after 1927, called it “an important landmark of policy” amidst what

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<sup>69</sup> Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 96. This was indeed the case until 1944-45. The states in the interim still found themselves exposed to the budgetary impact of the Great Depression; see Mathews and Jay, *op. cit.*, p. 121, and R.C. Gates, “The Search for a State Growth Tax”, in Mathews, *Intergovernmental Relations in Australia*, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

<sup>70</sup> Mathews and Jay, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-4. In the absence of unanimity on the division of amounts between governments, a formula would be applied of up to one fifth to the Commonwealth and the rest to be divided between the states in proportion to their net loan expenditures during the previous five years.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>72</sup> ‘Submission to Federal Parliamentary Constitutional Committee of Amendments Proposed by Sir Earle Page’, January 1957, EPP, folder 1659.

he called the “easy-going mediocrity” that pervaded Australian society in the 1920s.<sup>73</sup>

The Loan Council, in particular, was a major success in institutionalizing Commonwealth-state co-operation. The contemporary economist R.C. Mills, not otherwise an admirer of the Financial Agreement, considered the Council “an eminently desirable feature of Australia public finance” that would secure better terms for loans and curb unnecessary borrowing.<sup>74</sup> (Mills was one of a minority of prominent economists untroubled by vertical fiscal imbalance: Giblin, Mills and Leslie Melville all felt that the per capita grants had promoted equity between the states).<sup>75</sup> Australian National University law professor J.E. Richardson in 1974 declared that the Agreement still stood as Australia’s most renowned example of legislated co-operation between the two main levels of government.<sup>76</sup> Although during the Depression of the 1930s the Loan Council briefly served as an economic council of governments, it did not constitute a planning body that controlled the ends to which loan monies would be directed. Page was to become determined to rectify this.

Some contemporary observers saw Page as the sole or at least main progenitor of the Financial Agreement. One was F.A. Bland, by now Australia’s most prominent political scientist, writing in a December 1935 article on Page and co-operative federalism.<sup>77</sup> Lang as a major player in the negotiations recalled Page as “the real architect” of the Financial Agreement.<sup>78</sup> In fact, Page was neither the originator of the Agreement nor its sole driver in the Bruce-Page government. Bruce’s statements soon after he took office clearly indicate that he did not rely on Page in reaching conclusions about the need to

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<sup>73</sup> W.K. Hancock ‘Then and Now’, *IPA Review*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1968, p. 92.

<sup>74</sup> R.C. Mills, ‘The Financial Relations of the Commonwealth and the States’, *The Economic Record*, May 1928, p. 11.

<sup>75</sup> Mathews and Jay, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-3. Vertical fiscal imbalance re-merged with the introduction of uniform income taxation in 1942.

<sup>76</sup> J.E. Richardson, ‘Patterns of Australian Federalism’, in Mathews, *Intergovernmental Relations in Australia*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>77</sup> F.A. Bland, ‘Inventing Constitutional Machinery – a Study of Dr. Earle Page’s Proposals for National Councils’, *Australian Quarterly*, December 1935, p. 16.

<sup>78</sup> Jack Lang, *The Great Bust: The Depression of the Thirties*, McNamara’s Books, Katoomba, 1980 (first published 1962), p. 65.

reform federalism. The Prime Minister was more publicly prominent in debates at the 1923, 1926 and 1927 Premiers' Conferences.<sup>79</sup>

But Page, under Bruce's ultimate direction, did contribute significantly to the crucial detailed negotiations that enabled the creation of the Loan Council. His assertive advocacy and tactical contribution in the final negotiations gave him a lasting political and public association with the Council. Mathews and Jay reflected that the slow, complex steps towards the signing of the Financial Agreement, which involved finding ways around fears of Commonwealth domination, state reluctance to assume responsibility for unpopular forms of taxation and the hostility of Jack Lang, "owed a great deal to the negotiating skill of the Commonwealth Treasurer."<sup>80</sup> Geoffrey Sawer wrote of Page's "ability to modify his own ideas as the opinion of his parliament and negotiations with the states required; the final agreement was a triumph both for himself and for the long-term non-Labor policy of putting this matter on a stable basis."<sup>81</sup>

Lang's memoir, *The Great Bust*, contains first-hand, if eclectic, recollections of Page as Treasurer. He portrayed him as an arch conservative in "one of the most determined anti-Labor governments this country has had", not least as it handed the Commonwealth Bank over to "big business."<sup>82</sup> Lang wrote at length of his state's opposition to the Loan Council, and called Bruce and Page unificationists who sought "deliberately to wreck the sovereignty of the states."<sup>83</sup> More specifically, and rather closer to the reality, Lang readily conceded that Page was "very inventive":

He was full of plans. He had a formula for every occasion. He was ready to dash them off like prescriptions. His political enemies had no

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<sup>79</sup> See for example the assessment of the 1923 Conference in *The Argus* of 30 May 1923, pp. 10-1.

<sup>80</sup> Mathews and Jay, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>81</sup> Sawer, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

<sup>82</sup> Lang, *op. cit.*, pp. 33, 35-6. Lang was presumably referring to 1924 legislation that placed the Bank under an independent Board of Directors; see Gollan, *op. cit.*, pp. 162-4.

<sup>83</sup> Lang, *ibid.*, pp. 61, 62.

chance of catching up with him, because before they could he had already started on a new path.<sup>84</sup>

He also praised Page as “a tough politician” who could both absorb and hand out criticism, with “much the better political brain” than Robert Menzies.<sup>85</sup>

Lang was not alone in casting Page as an inveterate centraliser. The Financial Agreement was one of several aspects of Page’s advocacy in the late 1920s that led other senior figures to perceive him as a centralist. According to Lang, Premiers during the campaign on the 1926 referenda on corporations and industrial relations powers thought he was plotting to impoverish them and centralise power.<sup>86</sup> Such suspicions came to the fore again over a decade later when Page tried to persuade the states to support his National Council planning initiative. Page thought of himself quite differently, but there is much in what the states sensed. He showed little empathy with the fundamental understanding that the Commonwealth and the states are formally equal in status and sovereign in nature, which Emy later described as having made the federation possible. Yet Page would remain immensely proud of the reform of the nation’s financial machinery through the Loan Council and the Financial Agreement, even arguing that they helped the raising of funds for Australia’s defence in the Second World War.<sup>87</sup>

### **Unfinished business: the Bruce-Page government’s final efforts to overhaul federalism**

So strong was the Bruce-Page commitment to efficient governance that even after this major triumph of the Financial Agreement, it continued with ambitious attempts to reform the federation. These involved three quite different strategies, with Page playing a significant role in each. The May 1929 Premiers’ Conference effectively repeated the 1923 effort to have the states agree to national co-ordination of policy. The Peden Royal Commission into

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35-6, 65.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>86</sup> Aaron Wildavsky, ‘The 1926 Referendum’, in Aaron Wildavsky and Dagmar Carboch (eds.), *Studies in Australian Politics*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1958, p. 33.

<sup>87</sup> Page in *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 14 September 1944, p. 830.

the Constitution, handed down in September 1929, provided the most comprehensive stocktake of the federation to date. But more novel – and lasting – were attempts to create a series of Commonwealth-state co-ordinating bodies, in which Page had the major hand. All three strategies were pursued with an urgency born of a growing sense that the economy was deteriorating and could not afford the burden of an ill-functioning federation. The breadth of Page’s involvement consolidated and lastingly shaped his commitment to co-operative federalism.

The prosperity that had enabled such measures earlier in the decade as tied road grants and the creation of the CSIR did not last. By 1927 the Commonwealth budget had fallen into deficit, leading to the sobriquet for Page of “the most tragic Treasurer Australia has ever known”.<sup>88</sup> As unemployment jumped during 1927 from under 6 per cent to 10 per cent, Bruce began publicly to ponder the reasons for slower economic growth.<sup>89</sup> Falling international wheat and wool prices were clearly contributing, but he became increasingly concerned by tariffs and the arbitration system. He feared that tariffs had gone beyond protecting only efficient and essential industries, thereby placing an unjustified burden on exporters. Bruce did not oppose arbitration *per se* but remained concerned that the overlapping Commonwealth and state systems caused confusion and conflict.<sup>90</sup> Misgivings about tariff strategy spread within the Bruce-Page government during its last year in office, reflecting questioning by Brigden, comments by a 1929 British Economic Commission to Australia and the deteriorating economy. By September that year, Bruce doubted that tariffs should increase any further.<sup>91</sup>

The Bruce-Page government therefore approached the May 1929 Premiers’ Conference with a special sense of urgency. In his opening address, Bruce lectured the Premiers on past failures and “an obligation on the shoulders of

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<sup>88</sup> John Hawkins, ‘Sir Earle Page: An Active Treasurer’, *Economic Round-up*, Commonwealth Department of the Treasury, no. 4, 2009, p. 6. The “tragic Treasurer” tag was applied by Nationalist MP, H.S. Gullett.

<sup>89</sup> On unemployment data, see Radi, *op. cit.*, p. 406 and Sinclair, *The Process of Economic Development in Australia*, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

<sup>90</sup> Richmond, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

<sup>91</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

every one of us to state our views with the utmost frankness, forgetful of all political considerations, and mindful only of the duty we owe to the people of Australia.” He was convinced that “the basic cause of all the economic troubles of Australia is the high cost of production”, the result of exorbitant labour costs and tariffs. Part of the solution lay in more efficient government.<sup>92</sup>

As in 1923, Bruce and Page proposed rationalisation across an array of fields that collectively amounted to an overhaul of federalism. Page’s favoured subjects of electricity and transport were prominent, but the Commonwealth also put forward health, workers’ compensation, observance of Anzac Day, Aboriginal reserves, voting procedures, registration of doctors, national insurance, child endowment and industrial legislation. The latter was presented as being especially important in eliminating costly duplication by either the states transferring full powers to the Commonwealth or the Commonwealth entirely withdrawing from arbitration. Page’s national power commission was again raised, to which end each state was called on to establish its own “authoritative body” to manage power development.<sup>93</sup> The conference also considered Gibson’s findings on national power resources but could only vaguely agree in principle on co-ordination and standardisation, for which the states would “give full consideration” to creating power authorities.<sup>94</sup> This Premiers’ Conference, the last presided over by the Bruce-Page government, was frustrated – as always, from Page’s perspective – by the resistance of the states.

The Bruce-Page government’s other late attempt to comprehensively reform federalism was the Peden Royal Commission. In 1927, following the new state movement’s failure to achieve change via a constitutional convention or parliamentary inquiry, the Commonwealth instead appointed a wide-ranging Royal Commission on constitutional reform. Latham had raised this idea as early as 1923 as an alternative to a convention, and later suggested Sir John

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<sup>92</sup> Bruce’s opening speech to the ‘Conference Between Commonwealth and States’, Canberra, 28 May 1929, EPP, folder 1625. This folder contains a full set of agenda papers.

<sup>93</sup> Conference memo on power, EPP, folder 416; see also speech by Page ‘Federal Power Commission’, *op. cit.*

<sup>94</sup> Report of conference results, copies at EPP folders 1781 and 2577.

Peden of Sydney University as chair.<sup>95</sup> The Royal Commission's report was submitted only the month before the Bruce-Page government was defeated. Peden found that most witnesses "expressed satisfaction" with existing Commonwealth-state co-operation, albeit amidst grumbles about the Commonwealth assuming too many responsibilities. Its majority findings noted with approval advances in co-operative federalism. Most were Bruce-Page initiatives – foremostly the Loan Council, but also including the Federal Aid Roads Board, the Federal Health Council, the new Federal Transport Council, the DMC and the CSIR.<sup>96</sup> Peden also showed that new states had survived Cohen as an issue (if not as an immediate likelihood) by recommending a liberalised process for their creation based on a petition from local electors followed by a referendum of the whole existing state.<sup>97</sup> Unlike Cohen, Peden only concerned itself with procedure for creating new states, not their desirability. No attempt was made by the Scullin government to implement the Peden recommendations, which were compromised by wide differences between the commissioners.<sup>98</sup> This was another disappointment for Page, and would not have restored his confidence in formal inquiries.

Page played a bigger personal role in promoting machinery for intergovernmental co-operation in specific policy fields. He saw such bodies as ideally not just co-ordinating the Commonwealth and the states, but also being accorded constitutional authority to exercise executive power. In the late 1920s, Page pursued this particular co-operative concept across two very different policy fields dear to him and to the Country Party, health and transport. The results were very different.

On health, Page was centrally involved in creating the first enduring inter-governmental entity for policy co-ordination. At the Premiers' Conference of May 1923 the Commonwealth had failed to secure agreement from the states

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<sup>95</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 109; also Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 238-9.

<sup>96</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission on the Constitution*, Government Printer, Canberra, 1929, copy at EPP, folder 2712. This copy bears some highlighting by Page himself.

<sup>97</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, pp. 200-1.

<sup>98</sup> Four commissioners favoured continuation of a federal system, but the other three produced a minority report calling for full power to the Commonwealth.

to a Royal Commission on the division of administrative responsibility for health between national, state and local tiers of government. This instead led to a special conference on national health and only then to the 1925-26 Royal Commission on Health, which recommended a Federal Health Council of the Commonwealth and the states. This was finally established in November 1926 as a body of respective chief health officers, not ministers, as Page had hoped. In 1936 it became a statutory agency, the National Health and Medical Research Council, which still functions today as the Commonwealth's manager of medical research funding and advisor on health issues.<sup>99</sup>

Page was at least as determined to institutionalise the co-ordination of another policy priority, national transport, a far more difficult proposition that readily raised state hackles about Commonwealth intrusion. Transport had long elicited earnest affirmations from all Australian governments of the need to work together, notably to unify railway gauges. It featured prominently in Page's 1917 speech to the Australasian Provincial Press Conference, but so little progress was made that in January 1927 he found himself reminding the Constitutional Club in Brisbane of the basic case for a "definite, continuous and comprehensive policy of transport development." All three tiers of government needed to work towards "a sane, continuous and well-directed plan." As always, Page thought that the Commonwealth must play the catalysing role, as "states are quite unable to raise the funds necessary for so vast an undertaking and their necessarily local outlook makes them ill-suited to plan."<sup>100</sup>

Transport received its most significant airing under the Bruce-Page government when the May 1929 Premiers' Conference considered a report by the Commonwealth Transport Committee chaired by Major John Northcott, Director of Army Stores and Transport. Its very broad findings on national co-ordination supported Page by calling for a Federal Transport Council of ministers and a Commonwealth Transportation Authority with power for "taking executive action

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<sup>99</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, pp. 428-9; also transcript of Page's evidence to the Joint Committee on Constitutional Review, 15 January 1957, Sydney, p. 52, EPP, folder 1660.

<sup>100</sup> Page speech to Constitutional Club, Brisbane, 6 January 1927, EPP, folder 417.

necessary to carry out policy decided by the Transport Council.”<sup>101</sup> The establishment of this Council was one of the few significant outcomes of this Premiers’ Conference, but it was an advisory body that met just once under the Bruce-Page government, in August 1929.<sup>102</sup> Scullin also made attempts to build Commonwealth-led co-operation, proposing at the February 1931 Premiers’ Conference a breadth of topics comparable to what Bruce and Page had raised, including transport.<sup>103</sup> Growing financial pressures on state transport systems were to draw Page back into this field during the early Lyons government.

### **The demise of the Bruce-Page government**

The climax that industrial conflict reached in the late 1920s contributed decisively to the fall of the Bruce-Page government in October 1929, although for reasons that had much to do with its own political misjudgements. In 1929 some 4.4 million working days were lost through strikes, approximately four times the annual average during the decade of the 1920s.<sup>104</sup> Over 1928-29 there were major and acrimonious strikes on the wharves, in the timber industry and on the New South Wales coalfields, all concerning issues of wages and conditions as the economy stalled. These drew robust responses from the Bruce-Page government. In September 1928 it legislated to open up the nation’s wharves to non-union labour and require waterfront workers to submit to a licencing system that gave the government power to cancel their employment. The government lost nine seats at the November 1928 election, leaving it vulnerable to defeat in the House at the hands of what Page called “an irregular Opposition” of dissident Nationalists and rural independents.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Commonwealth Transport Committee (Chairman Major John Northcott), *Summary Report on the Co-ordination of Transport in Australia by the Commonwealth Transport Committee*, Canberra, 1929, EPP, folder 1625. Northcott served as Governor of New South Wales 1946-57.

<sup>102</sup> See NAA, A1 1932/8838, Ministerial Transport Council – Minutes of First Meeting – 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1929.

<sup>103</sup> ‘Conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers’, 6, 7, 9, 10, 13, 25 and 26 February 1931, EPP, folder 1105. This conference also addressed finance, banking, electoral administration and a “three year plan.”

<sup>104</sup> Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

<sup>105</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, p. 214.

Page's last major legislative initiative was to introduce a National Insurance Bill into parliament in September 1928, in fulfilment of the goal he had announced back in his 1922 election policy speech. The bill followed the recommendations of a long-running Royal Commission on national insurance, and proposed sickness, old age, disability and maternity benefits paid for by compulsory contributions, along with smaller payments to parents of children under 16 and to orphans. This scheme had been strongly promoted during the 1928 campaign but was so hampered by opposition from within the government's own ranks that the bill had still not been passed when the government was defeated the following year, partly due to its transgression of state responsibilities such as workers' compensation. "We missed the psychological moment for its passage in an attempt to make the legislation all-embracing", reflected Page in his memoirs.<sup>106</sup>

The May 1929 Premiers' Conference triggered the sequence of events leading to the defeat of the government. When the states rejected the proposed transfer of state industrial arbitration to the Commonwealth, Bruce declared that instead his government would withdraw from arbitration in most industries. In August 1929 he introduced into parliament the Maritime Industries Bill that sought to establish a new industrial tribunal to cover workers in inter-state and overseas maritime transport, but also to leave most other federal industrial jurisdiction to the states alone. Unions representing the 700,000 workers subject to federal awards opposed any such shift to state coverage. The bill was defeated on the floor of the House on 10 September 1929 by a single vote at the hands of Nationalist dissidents Hughes, Mann, W.M. Marks and G.A. Maxwell, along with erstwhile Country Party members Stewart and William McWilliams.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 305-6; see also Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>107</sup> The vital shift in Marks's vote arose from his objection to Bruce failing to consult parliamentary colleagues when he declared that a motion by Hughes to postpone the Bill until a referendum or an election amounted to a motion of no confidence in the government; see Page, *ibid.*, pp. 216-7, and Ellis, *ibid.*, pp. 159-60. Also contributing to the government's defeat in the House was the refusal of the Speaker to vote and the failure of the Country Party's chosen candidate for the Victorian seat of Indi at the 1928 election to lodge his deposit in time, resulting in its being won by the ALP.

Bruce was resoundingly defeated at the ensuing 12 October election, losing 18 government seats, including his own seat of Flinders and three held by the Country Party. Popular fear that a re-cast arbitration system would degrade living standards easily overrode ideals of co-operative federalism and national efficiency. Writing in his memoirs, Page reflected on other, less immediate, factors in the fall of the Bruce-Page government: the coalminers strike, for which he largely blamed the employer, John Brown; the government's decision not to proceed with prosecution of the same employer over a breach of federal law, seen as unfairly discriminating against organised labour; and his own 1929-30 budget which responded to a fall in customs revenue with increases in income and entertainment taxes, increased customs duties including on spirits and beer, and an especially unpopular new duty on foreign films. Page admitted that the stress of continued opposition from both outside and within the government had made it a relief to lose.<sup>108</sup>

One of the first major policy moves of the new Scullin government was to act on the longstanding ALP hostility to the Migration Agreement. In early November 1929 it announced the cessation of most assisted migration, citing rising unemployment and falling commodity prices, and followed this the next year with the abolition of the DMC.<sup>109</sup> Page's angry speech to the House seven months later on the repeal of the DMC legislation shows how centrally it had lodged in his thinking. The DMC had used "some of the best brains in the country" and was able to tackle "the main factor in Australia's present economic sickness [which] is the lack of co-ordination in all those activities of government which have to do with the development of this country."<sup>110</sup> The government responded on the plainer grounds of a need to economise and the lack of jobs for immigrants, as well as concerns over government control of development policy.<sup>111</sup> Page's anger was sharpened by his no doubt seeing the demise of the DMC as extinguishing – for the time being – his hopes for The Gorge project. Bruce commented many years later that the Scullin government's

<sup>108</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *ibid.*, pp. 216-8; see also see Dagmar Carboch, 'The Fall of the Bruce-Page Government', in Wildavsky and Carboch, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-40.

<sup>109</sup> See Roe, *Australia, Britain, and Migration 1915-1940*, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-45.

<sup>110</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 17 June 1930, pp. 2767, 2752.

<sup>111</sup> Wettenhall, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

abolition of “my” DMC denied the nation “a clear-cut picture of the development of Australia” with “no colour of politics.” (Indeed, he considered this “his deepest regret” after leaving office).<sup>112</sup> This heavily qualifies later suggestions that the Bruce-Page government had operated in an “atmosphere not conducive to the careful estimation of costs and benefits.”<sup>113</sup>

The DMC was extinguished as an organisation but the ideas it had embodied were to linger, mainly due to Page. The DMC model of co-opting business leaders, formalised co-ordination with the states, expert assessment of projects and the institutionalisation of national development above party politics was, along with the Loan Council, the inspiration for Page’s proposed National Council of 1938-9 and a string of later planning proposals. They helped inspire his efforts to keep ideas of planning and co-operative federalism on the national political agenda for over three decades beyond the demise of the Bruce-Page government. Yet despite Page’s admiration for the DMC, both it and the Brigden Enquiry marked the start of increasing reliance on economic expertise in public policy. Brigden in particular was “an enduring landmark in Australian economic history” by marking “economists’ first prominent step on the stage of public life in Australia.”<sup>114</sup> This shift was in future years to prove increasingly problematic for Page.

Scepticism concerning Page’s developmentalist ambitions was clearly discernable even in the optimistic 1920s. He had not dominated the Bruce-Page government, but was its most fecund generator of new policies. Page and the Country Party had habitually steered the government towards their various favoured policy initiatives but were constrained by Bruce’s caution, the resistance of the states, and the misgivings of experts in the DMC and the engineering profession. Despite this, and the comprehensiveness of the government’s eventual defeat, the Bruce-Page experience gave Page a lasting sense of possibilities. Service as Treasurer confirmed him as a major national

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<sup>112</sup> Edwards, *Bruce of Melbourne, op. cit.*, pp. 440-1.

<sup>113</sup> Sinclair in Forster, *op. cit.*, p. 24; Sinclair also portrays governments of the time as being unconcerned by land constraints in his *The Process of Economic Development in Australia, op. cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>114</sup> Coleman, Cornish and Hagger, *ibid* pp. 65-6, 72.

figure and provided a stable platform for combining his official and more personal goals. He routinely alluded to these years when talking of what governments could and should do, the Bruce-Page government being his benchmark for a sound developmentalist-oriented administration.

## **CHAPTER 6 – THE 1930s, PAGE’S MOST MIXED DECADE**

Page was out of ministerial office until November 1934 when the Country Party belatedly again formed a coalition with the urban-based conservatives, now recast as the United Australia Party (UAP). Although as a minister over 1934-39 he successfully advocated fewer new policies than he had in the 1920s, Page was as ambitious a visionary as ever and was not restrained – but nor, for that matter, enabled – by a strong Prime Minister.

The early 1930s was an unusually febrile time in Australian party politics. Under the stress of the Great Depression, most national and state governments were defeated at the polls. The ALP underwent splits involving both its right and left wings, and the new UAP absorbed elements of the Labor right. The Country Party sat on the crossbenches in parliament, but under an expectation that the coalition would be reinstated once the Scullin government had been defeated. The strident rhetoric of Premier Lang and the perception that his government had rendered itself illegitimate by repudiating interest payments to British bondholders inspired a counter movement of loyalist, middle class-based organisations such as the All for Australia League.

Much of this tension over Lang was lanced by the success of the UAP led by Joseph Lyons at the national election of December 1931 and the Premier’s sudden removal from office by the state governor the following May. Lyons had been a senior minister in the Scullin government, but emerged as the leader of party dissidents who rejected Treasurer Theodore’s proposal to expand credit as a response to the Depression. Lyons broke with the ALP in March 1931 when he supported a motion of no confidence in the government. His electoral appeal of restraint and personal modesty encouraged a coterie of Melbourne business and political figures to entice him into becoming the UAP’s first leader.

The UAP united the Nationalists, former ALP members who favoured stricter economic austerity than was palatable to most of their onetime colleagues and some more populist movements including the All for Australia League. The

new party emerged from an economic and political crisis unprecedented in the short history of the Australian Commonwealth – “cobbled together out of political expediency, it was a party of action without elaborate party rules or even a mission statement.”<sup>1</sup> Lyons was a very different personage from Page. His instinct was “to delegate and to manage rather than command.”<sup>2</sup> As Prime Minister, Lyons kept the UAP sufficiently united to reassure the public that stable government had been restored. It is a tribute to his ability to handle colleagues that despite limited policy ambitions of his own, he eventually won Page’s support and even admiration.

Page shared the expectation of forming a coalition immediately after Scullin’s defeat. A joint party conference and policy statement for the 1931 election campaign even raised some prospect of the Country Party amalgamating with the UAP. Immediately after the election, Lyons offered the Country Party three portfolios (despite the UAP having won a parliamentary majority) but with the unacceptable proviso that he alone would select ministers. Page said privately he did not want to expose the Country Party to the “big Melbourne manufacturers and stockbrokers” who had had John Latham (Lyons’s predecessor as Opposition leader) “buried alive.”<sup>3</sup>

Once in office, Lyons’s reluctance to accede to Country Party demands for tariff cuts kept the two parties apart.<sup>4</sup> The coalition was only restored after the UAP lost its majority at the election of September 1934 and failed in an attempt to continue governing alone. Lyons provided an assurance that decisions on tariffs would be acceptable to the Country Party.<sup>5</sup> Although the Country Party scored a success when the new coalition cut tariffs on machinery, its overall status was weaker than in the Bruce-Page government. It held four positions in

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Henderson, *Joseph Lyons: The People’s Prime Minister*, NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, 2011, p. 319.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315.

<sup>3</sup> Page to A.G. Cameron, 29 April 1931, EPP folder 810, quoted in P.R. Hart, ‘Lyons: Labor Minister – Leader of the UAP’, in *The Great Depression in Australia, Labour History*, Number 17, p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> Davey, *Ninety Not Out*, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-2. Lyons did however cut many tariffs in early 1933 following advice from the Tariff Board; see Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, pp. 197-8.

<sup>5</sup> Kosmas Tsokhas, *Markets, Money and Empire: The Political Economy of the Australian Wool Industry*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1990, pp. 81-2.

a ministry of fourteen, two of which were without portfolio. Page was again *de facto* Deputy Prime Minister, but held the lesser portfolio of Commerce.

During the 1930s policy priority shifted from the national and rural development that had suited Page in the 1920s to recovery from the Depression. Lyons sought to restore business confidence by balancing budgets and lowering costs. He maintained the deflationary policies of the Premiers' Plan agreed between Scullin and the states in June 1931 that imposed a shared sacrifice through higher taxes, less public spending and reduced interest payments to local bond holders. Accordingly, the Lyons government proceeded to cut public service salaries and social service benefits. Some emergency Depression taxes were also cut, while Stanley Bruce, back in parliament and now Assistant Treasurer, negotiated for reduced interest payments to British holders of Australian bonds. A five-year period of recovery began in mid-1932. Cheaper currency assisted export sales and the 1932 Ottawa Imperial Economic Conference gave farmers greater access to British markets in return for lower tariffs on manufactures from Britain. Rural industries, particularly pastoralism, began a slow revival. Manufacturing recovered more strongly to become a mass employer, aided by the high tariffs imposed by Scullin and a devalued currency that made imports dearer. From 1933 unemployment began to fall but took until 1938 to reach 8 per cent, a middling rate for the previous decade.<sup>6</sup>

Rural policy was narrower than in the 1920s, offering Page less opportunity to add his own vision to mainstream initiatives. The focus was on wheat and dried fruits, each driven by different pressures. The wheat industry was afflicted by low prices and debt acquired from over-expansion in the 1920s. Although during 1930-36 growers received bounties and relief payments from the Commonwealth, it was only following a fall in wheat prices that in 1938 a home consumption price was introduced, financed by a flour tax.<sup>7</sup> Policy on

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<sup>6</sup> Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, *op. cit.*, p. 180; and J.R. Robertson, '1930-39', in Crowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 435-6, 438.

<sup>7</sup> See briefing note on orderly marketing schemes prepared for the Rural Reconstruction Commission, typed copy in EPP folder 2630, p. 20; also Lloyd, 'Agricultural Price Policy' in D.B. Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 359. A 1934-36 Royal Commission on the Wheat, Flour and Bread Industries had advised against a home consumption price as the net cost disadvantage of

dried fruit was driven by constitutional challenges to the regulation of interstate trade which occupied much of Page's time in the latter years of the decade. More positively for Page, the 1930s offered richer intellectual debate on policy than had the 1920s. The journals *Australian Quarterly* and *Public Administration* first appeared in 1929 and 1937 respectively, and the Australian Institute of Political Science (AIPS) was established in 1932. Widened debate elicited reflections on Page's policy visions, especially planning and co-operative federalism. Economic thought began in the mid-1930s to turn to averting future depressions, hence such publications as *Economic Planning* (proceedings of a 1934 AIPS conference) and F.A. Bland's *Planning the Modern State* (also 1934). The suffering and political cleavages of those years convinced many policy intellectuals of a need for more than just minor reform, hence an openness to planning, welfarism and, eventually, Keynesianism.<sup>8</sup> Although such ponderings had an urban basis well removed from Page's rural orientation, they encouraged him to resume his interest in planning.

But the overall trend for Page during this decade was one of growing difficulty in anchoring his initiatives in the mainstream politics in which he operated. Not only did the policy priorities of the Commonwealth government narrow, but the Country Party itself was to offer Page progressively less basis for pursuing his vision. There were also further signs that policy making was building on the DMC and the Brigden Enquiry of the previous decade by continuing to shift towards greater reliance on economic expertise. This trend was to become especially apparent in the post-war policy environment, a focus of the next chapter.

Page therefore found himself during the 1930s searching for opportunities to pursue his developmentalist agenda. This chapter explains how his focus shifted as different such opportunities arose, making him the leading national advocate of change in five related elements of his national vision in sequence.

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tariffs to the industry had declined, but conceded it could be justified as a strictly temporary relief measure.

<sup>8</sup> Moore in Walter, *op. cit.*, pp. 162, 165, 168, 173. The 1937 Royal Commission on Monetary and Banking Systems for example recommended that the Commonwealth Bank work to reduce fluctuations in the economy.

Each arose from very different circumstances. Regionalism and new statism were revived by events in New South Wales, particularly Lang's interest payment repudiation in 1931-32. From 1934 Page became directly involved in the campaign to establish a university in New England, led by new state advocates and providing a focus for his longstanding interest in rural-based education. His renewed engagement with co-operative federalism via Commonwealth-state policy councils was driven by the need to respond to challenges to Australia's trade interests and orderly marketing, leading to the creation of the Australian Agricultural Council in 1934. In 1936, electrification arose briefly via Page's alertness to opportunities linked to trade policy and to collaboration with New South Wales. Finally, Page became the main political proponent of national planning, aided by the threat of war and leading to his 1938-9 attempt to create a National Council of Commonwealth and state ministers. This remarkable policy venture encompassed all the objectives of Page's preceding policy campaigns on decentralisation, electrification, rural services and Commonwealth-state co-operation. The chapter ends with an account of Page's dramatic fall from political power in 1939, including how his unsuccessful planning initiative might have contributed.

### **Page's freedoms as a private member, 1929-34: the revival of new statism**

The defeat of the Bruce-Page government restored the federal Country Party's sense of freedom. Page described the five years that followed as a period which "sharpened our wits and enabled us to prepare public opinion for the policies we hoped to implement when the next opportunity came."<sup>9</sup> Characteristically, it was Page who took greatest advantage of this release from ministerial office and coalition to become more outspoken on issues dear to him.

An early example arose from Scullin's use of trade barriers to try to ameliorate the Depression. This was a cue for Country Party MPs to resume public attacks on tariffs and for Page to revive his more finely balanced ideas on how

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<sup>9</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

tariffs should be applied. In July 1930 he spoke of the nation as “tariff mad,” especially given barriers to the importation of electrical equipment that retarded electrification across the economy. Page delighted in bold international comparisons and cast such misapplied protection as a reason why Australia was developing more slowly than Canada. He also made clear his willingness to protect Australian manufacturing, provided this concentrated on internationally competitive products that used primary inputs such as wool and flour. Lack of such targeting resulted in Australia having “built up many exotic industries that are non-essential and unsuited for the natural environment of the country.”<sup>10</sup>

But the issue Page pursued most energetically was new statism, for the first time since Cohen. In the wake of the Bruce-Page government’s defeat, Page’s erstwhile friend Percy Stewart accurately predicted to Hughes that “no doubt Page will bring out his New State hobby horse and mount him again.”<sup>11</sup> New statism demonstrated its capacity to flare up as a focus for rural resentment by broadening markedly in the late 1920s and early 1930s, encouraged by Page. He rapidly became the central figure in this revival, including a largely successful move to unite the various New South Wales new state movements. The main underlying cause was the impact of the Depression on rural Australia, but Lang’s first repudiation in March 1931 provided a galvanising issue that Page and his new state followers seized upon to call for the unilateral separation of the state’s north. To them, Lang’s actions justified dispensing with constitutional formalities in favour of open rebellion against a government they considered to have rendered itself illegitimate, in doing so casting themselves as upholders of the federal constitution. The defeat of the Bavin-Buttenshaw state government in October 1930 released Country Party leaders of the calibre of Bruxner and Drummond to join this campaign.<sup>12</sup>

New state agitation strengthened in three ways. Firstly, there was a marked geographic widening of campaigning beyond northern New South Wales. The

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<sup>10</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 17 July 1930, pp. 4252-4, 4260.

<sup>11</sup> Graham, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

<sup>12</sup> Aitkin, *The Colonel*, *op. cit.* p. 137.

movement from 1931 acquired a strong base in the Riverina, drawing on the precedent of the Riverina New State League that had been active in the early 1920s. Agitation briefly matched that in the state's north, invigorated by the charismatic leadership of the Wagga Wagga timber merchant Charles Hardy.<sup>13</sup> The course of events in this region was to have considerable implications for Page. There were also lesser revivals in the west and southeast of New South Wales, and in northern Queensland.

Secondly, new intellectual proponents and political movements added non-rural strands to new statism and decentralisation. New states became a beacon for agitation for constitutional change and creative responses to the Depression that overlapped with the more parochial agendas of older school new staters. This included movements that proffered themselves as avowedly anti-political alternatives to conventional party politicking. The outspoken decentralist engineer Alex Gibson, for example, was prime mover in the All for Australia League.<sup>14</sup>

Page dallied with these more rarefied advocates in the early 1930s and later during the post-war era. Some responded by recognising him as the preeminent political advocate of new states and decentralisation. Bland, increasingly outspoken from his base at the University of Sydney on a myriad of issues, often wrote in support of Page initiatives. In the early 1930s, Bland was an advocate of decentralisation and regionalism but not of the new states that had been so far proposed, which he thought would still be so large as to pose problems of remoteness. He dismissed northern New South Wales agitation as merely seeking a bigger share of public expenditure, and proposed amalgamating local councils into larger District Councils, akin to Cohen's recommendation.<sup>15</sup> Also prominent was the geographer J. Macdonald Holmes, who thought it opportune to create new states now that the geographic limits for agriculture were being reached, helping delineate natural boundaries for

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<sup>13</sup> Blacklow, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>14</sup> Trevor Matthews, 'The All For Australia League', *Labour History* No. 17, *The Great Depression in Australia*, 1970, pp. 136-47.

<sup>15</sup> F.A. Bland, 'The Abolition of States and the Increase of Local Government Bodies', reprinted from *The Shire and Municipal Record*, November 1932, copy in Ulrich Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 15, folder 55.

settlement.<sup>16</sup> More marginal but still outspoken figures included Dr Norman Pern, a Sydney GP who in his 1932 booklet *Australia Speaking – is Earle Page Right?* wrongly asserted that Page was interested only in splitting up New South Wales.<sup>17</sup> A few new state advocates tried making use of broader interest in constitutional reform. In April 1933 Ulrich Ellis established (apparently at his own behest) a Constitution League in Canberra, a short-lived discussion group which attracted Solicitor-General Fred Whitlam and Labor-leaning journalist Warren Denning.<sup>18</sup>

Thirdly, the wider regional base and engagement of articulate intellectuals encouraged an expressly national approach to new states reminiscent of what Page had advocated at the Albury convention of July 1922. As the seasoned campaigner V.C. Thompson later recalled, there was an “enlarging of the movement’s sphere of political interest on the national plane.”<sup>19</sup> The northern New South Wales movement’s 1929 convention at Armidale unanimously adopted a resolution calling for “a national movement for a new Federal system with a new distribution of powers and a new distribution of territory.”<sup>20</sup> Another national convention was held in Canberra in May 1930 against the background of the Scullin government’s attempt to liberalise mechanisms for constitutional amendment, and called for adoption of the Peden formula for new states.<sup>21</sup> Page became directly involved in the two main groups to emerge from this revival, bolstering his claim to national leadership of the new state movement – the Sydney-based Federal Reconstruction Movement (FRM), and the United Country Movement (UCM) which was to merge with the Country Party in 1931.

The FRM arose from the preference intellectual supporters of new states and decentralisation had for broader bodies than individual regional movements. It

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<sup>16</sup> J. Macdonald Holmes, *The "New States" Idea and its Geographic Background*, New Century Press, Sydney, 1933.

<sup>17</sup> Ulrich Ellis collection, UNE Archives, A0811, box 13, contains copies of Pern’s publications. Pern’s own vision was of a “United Federation of Australia” based on self-governing regions united by a national railway system.

<sup>18</sup> See Ellis’s account of the League’s meeting of 11 April 1933, Ulrich Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 22, series 7B, folder 97.

<sup>19</sup> From an account of the new state movement written by Thompson for Page (untitled), January 29 1958, p.1, EPP, folder 2146.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> *The Canberra Times*, 20 May 1930, p. 2, and 21 May 1930, p.5.

was formed in July 1932 with Stanley Kingsbury as first honorary secretary, a professional publicist who Page had once engaged to advise the new state cause.<sup>22</sup> It proposed replacing the states with smaller federal units and shared Page's interest in transferring many state powers to a strong national government.<sup>23</sup> The FRM's other leading lights included Bland, the educationalist and state public servant H.L. Harris, and the Sydney barrister Richard Windeyer.

But the UCM was the most important organisation to arise from the 1931-32 spike in activity and the closest the new state movement ever came to a united structure. The UCM was also the main basis for Page's resumption of active leadership of the movement. It formed out of a chain of events that began with the rise of the United Australia Association, led by Hardy to promote the Riverina cause. Hardy at his peak portrayed himself as offering a full alternative to the Country Party.<sup>24</sup> His impassioned calls for direct action to free the Riverina from the grip of Lang's Sydney led to his being cast as that rarest of species in the Australian political pantheon, the demagogue. (Robert Clyde Packer – Frank's father – dubbed him the "Cromwell of the Riverina.") Hardy's speeches included oblique references to a secret paramilitary force supposedly at his disposal. His threats of unilateral secession attracted the attention of the New South Wales Police and the Commonwealth Investigation Branch.<sup>25</sup> Hardy envisaged the secession of the Riverina as ushering in a regime of local authorities that would, rather incongruously, be led by a strong

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<sup>22</sup> See Kingsbury to Page, 13 June 1932, EPP, folder 1020. Kingsbury advised that the new state campaign should form a Sydney Reform League to build urban-based support in anticipation of a statewide referendum.

<sup>23</sup> See Ulrich Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, p. 224; and 'Report to Annual Meeting by the Provisional Executive Committee' of the FRM by R. Windeyer and Stanley Kingsbury, 28 September 1932, David Henry Drummond Papers, UNE Archives, A0248, V3010, folder 6.

<sup>24</sup> Ulrich Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 171; Aitkin, *The Colonel*, *op. cit.*, pp. 136-7.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Moore, 'Hardy, Charles Downey', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, *op. cit.*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/hardy-charles-downey-6561/text11283>, published first in hardcopy volume 9, Melbourne University Press, 1983. Moore elsewhere concluded that right-wing paramilitary movements of the early 1930s, especially the Old Guard, had a distinct rural element and that some members were prominent in the Country Party and new statism, notably C.L.A. Abbott, member for the federal seat of Gwydir 1925-29 and 1931-37. They shared a preparedness to assume control should there be a breakdown of the Lang government. See Andrew Moore *The Secret Army and the Premier: Conservative Paramilitary Organisations in New South Wales 1930-32*, New South Wales University Press, Kensington, 1989, pp. 93-9 and 103-6.

national parliament.<sup>26</sup> Hardy was Page's only serious rival as the new state movement's most prominent public figure. He was even suspected of having designs on the national leadership of the Country Party. In May 1931, Hardy challenged Page accordingly:

If Earle Page refuses to co-operate with the Riverina and Western Movements, our intention is to go to the north coast to test whether the people want Dr Page or the Riverina Movement. Watch out, Dr Page, that you do not get out of step with the country people.<sup>27</sup>

Page wrote in his memoirs of the Riverina movement's attempt, backed by unspecified "influential Sydney personalities", to take the place of the state Country Party. He drolly called all these pressures "diverse undercurrents," which were successfully neutralised by the creation of the UCM.<sup>28</sup> The "Sydney personalities" may have been an oblique reference to the city-based All for Australia League, which had strong ties to the protectionist Chamber of Manufactures of New South Wales and made overtures to Hardy. (Some Country Party figures suspected the League of plotting to eventually absorb all non-Labor parties.)<sup>29</sup> But Hardy presented only a passing challenge. As a longstanding party leader with a good prospect of shortly returning to government, Page in 1931 was a firmly established national figure. Hardy soon displayed the typical limitations of the demagogue by outstripping his capacity for substantive action. He did not have a firm platform beyond the Riverina movement and lacked grounding in practical politics. His contempt for established politicians and suspected interest in the party leadership drew the disdain of established rural leaders such as Bruxner.<sup>30</sup>

During 1931 Hardy slowly entered into alliances with other new staters and the Country Party. Over March to August he attended a series of four conventions of New South Wales new state movements.<sup>31</sup> By June he had publicly

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<sup>26</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 178.

<sup>28</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 242-3.

<sup>29</sup> Matthews *op. cit.* p. 138; Davey, *The Nationals*, *op. cit.*, p. 59; and Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

<sup>30</sup> Aitkin, *The Colonel*, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

<sup>31</sup> Ellis, *A Pen in Politics*, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

reclassified Page, Bruxner and Drummond as colleagues to be thanked for having “helped the new movements over the hurdles of constitutional difficulties.”<sup>32</sup> At the August convention Hardy called for all four regional movements in New South Wales to be moulded into one organisation, leading to the creation of the UCM chaired by him. In October he led a Riverina delegation to the Prime Minister, only to find that Scullin not only opposed new states but favoured an all-powerful federal parliament that delegated powers to provinces and could amend the Constitution effectively at will. This prospect so unnerved Hardy that he switched to favouring more fully sovereign new states, bringing him yet closer to Page.<sup>33</sup> Hardy fully entered the Country Party fold when elected a senator in December 1931.<sup>34</sup> He became representative of the malleability of so much new state agitation and its tendency to lack sustainable strategies. The UCM was soon effectively absorbed within the Country Party by being given a place on the Central Council of the redubbed United Country Party (UCP) of New South Wales. The new UCP supported the division of New South Wales along the lines of the state’s new state movements – the Riverina, the north, the west, and the Monaro-south coastal-metropolitan region.<sup>35</sup> Hardy’s earlier calls for expanded local authorities had aroused such suspicions he was a mere unificationist that the UCM-UCP union was only consummated after he underwent searching questioning by Drummond.<sup>36</sup>

Although Page declined an offer to lead the UCM, he became its main driver. He had the public status and political skills to tie it to his own northern wing of the movement, and soon outshone Hardy. He supported the UCM’s *de facto* union with the Country Party and successfully proposed that it broaden its platform to encompass continued future subdivision into “new federal units”, a shift of selected powers from the states to the Commonwealth and a national transport authority.<sup>37</sup> Almost uniquely amongst new state organisations, the

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<sup>32</sup> Aitkin, *The Colonel*, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>33</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, pp. 180-1; and *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 October 1931, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

<sup>35</sup> Davey, *The Nationals*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>36</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

<sup>37</sup> Minutes of joint meeting of the New England, Riverina, Monaro-South Coast and Western movements, 13 August 1931, Ulrich Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 14, folder 45.

UCM proclaimed criteria for delineating the boundaries of new states, albeit broad ones – political and economic balance, “community of interest”, facility of communications, diversity of production and natural outlets for trade.<sup>38</sup> Page was also central to the UCM’s entering into an alliance with the FRM. Soon after the UCM was formed, he and other UCM figures met with the FRM leadership, including Bland. The FRM was reassured to conclude from this that “no difference exists between the objectives as we understand them of the Federal Reconstruction Movement and the ultimate objectives of the United Country Movement” (including the transfer of transport and industrial powers to the Commonwealth prior to the subdivision of New South Wales), so much so that Page and Drummond were elected as FRM vice-presidents.<sup>39</sup>

A nominally united new state movement with multiple geographic and sectoral bases was always at risk from regional rivalries and conflicting motivations. Northern New South Wales disagreed with other movements over the configuration of its proposed new state, such as the siting of its deep sea port. At the August 1931 convention western New South Wales objected to being bracketed with Sydney. (It was felt by Drummond and Holmes that the metropolis needed a hinterland).<sup>40</sup> Drummond remained uneasy over the FRM and warned Page in November 1933 that Bland’s plan for non-sovereign provinces “somewhat along the lines of the English County Council” was bound to fail given “the centralising influence which is bred in the bone of the people of this state”.<sup>41</sup> The importance that leaders of the Riverina and New England movements attached to simpler and cheaper governments must have sowed unease amongst many grass roots supporters hoping for more public resources.<sup>42</sup> But the revival over 1929-32 did show that new statism and an elite-led sense of rural grievance had not only maintained a place in Australian political culture, but had acquired urban-based adherents. Page played a

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<sup>38</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

<sup>39</sup> Letter to the Secretary of the FRM from Bland, H.L. Harris and R.W.G. MacKay, undated but internal evidence suggests August 1932, David Henry Drummond Papers, UNE Archives, A0248, V3010, folder 6; the *Armidale Express* of 18 November 1932, p. 3, reported on the UCM conference in Armidale and the election of FRM vice-presidents.

<sup>40</sup> R.G. Neale, ‘New States Movement’, *Australian Quarterly*, September 1950, p. 16.

<sup>41</sup> Drummond to Page, 29 November 1935, David Henry Drummond Papers, UNE Archives A0248, V3010, folder 8, part 5.

<sup>42</sup> See Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, p. 213, on proposed smaller government.

central strategic role in this, not least by successfully resisting Hardy's short-lived attempt to become national leader.

### **Page militant: leading the attempted secession of New England**

1931-32 was a uniquely militant phase in Page's campaigning for new states. He led the most remarkable of all new state campaigns, premised on condemnation of the government of New South Wales as illegitimate. Page and his followers proposed responding to this sentiment and a feared breakdown of government altogether with a call for the unilateral separation of the state's north. Although the attempted secession evaporated immediately Premier Lang was removed from office, the episode reveals much about the broader climate of ideas and Page's capacity to lead the new state movement.

Condemnation of Lang's government drew upon some basic mores of rural community culture – thrift and the belief that paying one's debts is an important matter of personal honour. Michael Cathcart wrote of a rural dimension to the agitation against Lang which drew on a commitment to meeting debts that outweighed resentment of the large banks. This reflected a sense of a "moral economy" as essential to the nation's financial stability.<sup>43</sup> Such attitudes had "deep psychological roots" and made financial repudiation by a government highly suggestive of unfitness to rule.<sup>44</sup> This moral reinforcement of calls to separate northern New South Wales was to feature strongly in Page's public campaigning.

On 9 February 1931 Lang announced his intention to repudiate the payment of interest due to foreign bond holders.<sup>45</sup> Page at once proposed to his "closest colleagues" a strategy based on the north declaring separation from New South Wales, now seen by him as an outlaw state. He raised this with legal advisers and state Country Party MPs Bruxner and Roy Vincent, then arranged for the

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Cathcart, *Defending the National Tuckshop: Australia's Secret Intrigue of 1931*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Fitzroy, 1988, p. 22.

<sup>44</sup> Brett, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-9.

<sup>45</sup> Schedvin, *op. cit.*, p. 233. Lang defaulted on overseas interest payments in March 1931 and again in January-February 1932.

journalists Thompson and Sommerlad to work on the northern press.<sup>46</sup> Page went public just eight days after Lang's announcement in a speech he delivered at Glenreagh on the state's north coast. Default "must automatically place New South Wales out of the Federal Union" and so "the people of the North seem to have no other course but to cut adrift from New South Wales."<sup>47</sup> Otherwise "they become repudiators also and suffer the penalties of repudiation – no capital for development in the next generation; withdrawal of capital by all who can because once a government has repudiated in one direction it cannot be trusted not to in others."<sup>48</sup>

Page's leadership of this campaign demonstrated his readiness to seize opportunities aggressively. It was he who summoned northern delegates to an Annual New States convention at Armidale on 28 February to endorse his proposals to form a provisional executive and submit a draft constitution to Federal Parliament.<sup>49</sup> He told delegates that "now is the psychological moment when the whole of Australia is stirred, and when our requests for admission are unanswerable," and called for petitions to the Commonwealth and British governments seeking recognition.<sup>50</sup> Page blamed Scullin's fiscal policies and the Lang left of the ALP for threatening the Financial Agreement, the state and indeed the entire nation. The new state's constitution would impose limits on taxes and borrowing to protect rural Australia from such urban profligacy. (Page the fiscal conservative was always loath to concede that any of his own plans could impose on the public purse). A self-governing, frugal New England would attract investors and set an example to be copied across the nation. Privately, he told Ellis that northern MPs should leave state parliament at once and establish a government based at Armidale.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, pp. 205-6.

<sup>48</sup> Page to R. Jones of Canowindra, 7 March 1931, Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 14, folder 44.

<sup>49</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

<sup>50</sup> Speech by Page to New States Convention 28 February 1931, New England New State Movement, UNE Archives, A0001, box 14.

<sup>51</sup> Ellis, *A Pen in Politics*, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

This was all a typical Page sequence of activity – grasping an opportunity to implement a long-held aim that would normally lack wider support; lining up important contacts; issuing ringing public calls for immediate action; and then trying to push through the necessary formalities. Page also rallied the New England New State Movement at a pivotal convention in Maitland in April 1931, which endorsed the constitution and working with other new state movements. Page exhorted his fellow new state militants to see themselves not as rebels but as loyalists intent on returning their territory to the national fold by rejecting Lang’s effective withdrawal of New South Wales from the federation.<sup>52</sup>

Lang’s threats were also important in the convening of the meetings that had brought Page and Hardy together in the UCM and where Page assumed ascendancy. At a rally at Wagga on 28 February 1931, Hardy issued an ultimatum to the state government to meet local demands by the end of the following month. Page recounted that soon afterwards Hardy privately confessed that he had no idea what to do if Lang stood firm (which the Premier indeed did). Follow the lead of the New Englanders, advised Page, by now clearly the movement’s leader.<sup>53</sup> Like Drummond, he was troubled by Hardy’s preference for weak local councils rather than the sovereign entities of the *bona fide* new stater. Page also hoped to keep open the option of a properly constitutional route to new states. In parliament in April he called on Scullin to recognise New England and the Riverina, either by a referendum to adopt the Peden formula for new states or by persuading the British Parliament to intervene.<sup>54</sup>

Page was not merely “flirting briefly and somewhat reluctantly with right-wing revolutionary politics.”<sup>55</sup> The primary documentation, such as the diary and memoirs of his chronicler Ellis, indicate that Page was determined in his leadership of the secession movement and its response to what he saw as an

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<sup>52</sup> Speech of 7 April 1931, in Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 12, series 6A, folder 33. For details of the Maitland conference, see Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, pp. 210-3 and 256-9.

<sup>53</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

<sup>54</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, pp. 213-4; *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 16 April 1931, pp. 924-8.

<sup>55</sup> Bridge, *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry on Page, *op. cit.*

unprecedented challenge to the fundamentals of governance. Nor was he one to turn up a rare opportunity to implement an important element of his personal vision. Ellis recalled in his history of new statism published soon after these events that whenever the movement seemed divided over the wisdom of such militancy, it was Page who rallied them. He pointed to Page's strident speech at Glenreagh invoking the West Virginians' self-declared secession from their mother state of Virginia at the onset of the American Civil War in 1861, "when the Constitution was infringed, so their honour might be unsmirched, their reputation untarnished, their obligations fulfilled and their progress and development as an integral part of the Federal Union assured."<sup>56</sup> (Dedicated new staters frequently drew a parallel with West Virginia, despite the vastly different historical circumstances). Ellis's detailed diary of the lead-up to the Maitland convention provides further evidence of Page's commitment. Page is quoted as confiding that achievement of a new state would rank alongside the Nymboida power scheme and the Financial Agreement as his lifetime achievements.<sup>57</sup>

Ellis also captured Page's confident sense of being ahead of all others in thought and action. On 22 March 1931 Page convened an all-day meeting at Parliament House Sydney with state and federal MPs in an attempt to secure their support for secession, only to be disappointed by their caution. Hardy is shown as again looking to Page and the northerners for a lead, such as by proposing that Riverina adopt the New England constitution.<sup>58</sup> Ellis recorded a telling comment from Bruxner that Page had not only started the campaign in 1915 but ever since "his continual activity had kept it alive".<sup>59</sup> Page also wrote to Drummond on his consultations with MPs who could form the "Governing Body" of the new state using terms that affirm the depth of his determination. He reiterated that "this is the psychological moment and possibly our only ever chance of ever getting away with it." If it failed, then "so far as I am concerned I

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<sup>56</sup> Page quoted in Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, p. 206

<sup>57</sup> Typed text of diary in Ulrich Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 12, series 6A, folder 33, entry for 24 February 1931. This diary was quoted at length in Ellis's posthumously published memoirs. Parts of the original handwritten version survive in the Ellis papers and differ only in very minor details; see MS 1006, box 14, series 6, folder 44.

<sup>58</sup> Ellis, *A Pen in Politics*, *op. cit.*, p.179; also Ellis diary, 28 and 30 March 1931, *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Ellis diary, 28 March 1931, *ibid.*

am finished with politics completely and will devote myself to my professional work and leave it to another generation to gather the results of the seed we have sown.”<sup>60</sup>

Nearly a year later, in April 1932 when Lang was threatening further repudiations in defiance of Commonwealth legislation, the UCM executive sought the support of the new Prime Minister by telegraphing him to demand a referendum on “the immediate reconstruction of the state of New South Wales into smaller federal units.”<sup>61</sup> Lyons opposed separation. Ellis penned an extraordinary letter to a contact in Brisbane in which he used personal euphemisms to describe how Page – dubbed by Ellis the President – had just approached federal Cabinet seeking support for his proposed breakaway state. Lyons was similarly labelled by Ellis the Chairman of Directors, Assistant Treasurer Bruce was the Cashier, and Attorney-General Latham was cast as the Lawyer. Bruce was described as commenting that “he thought the Chairman of Directors would have to fight our branch [i.e. the new state movement] if we adopted the attitude outlined by the President.” But he added that “there are other people in the world he wants to fight more and with more reason.”<sup>62</sup> (Although Ellis had a well-developed sense of the dramatic, his use of this subterfuge is not entirely outlandish. The political tensions of these months raised fear of conflict between the security forces of the Commonwealth and those of New South Wales).<sup>63</sup>

The UCM leadership met on 17 April 1932 at Page’s Wollstonecraft residence in Sydney, followed the next day by a meeting of the UCM at which its Executive revealed the intended plan for secession. This would begin with all “loyal state members” being called together “for the purpose of subdividing New South Wales into four units.”<sup>64</sup> Local conventions were to be held at Armidale,

<sup>60</sup> Page to Drummond 18 March 1931, Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 14, folder 44.

<sup>61</sup> Moore, *The Secret Army and the Premier*, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>62</sup> Ellis to Jack Ridler, 7 March 1932, Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 14, folder 45. Ridler’s identity is unclear; he is not in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Page’s memoirs or any of Ellis’s histories. Page provides a brief account of this meeting in *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

<sup>63</sup> See Moore, *The Secret Army and the Premier*, *op. cit.*, pp. 170, 200-1.

<sup>64</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 245. Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, provides a similar description of the action proposed, pp. 188-9, but gives a different date

Wagga, Dubbo and Sydney to appoint provisional governments, which would then each proceed to seek Commonwealth recognition followed by a referendum to ratify a new state constitution. Finally, the constitution and boundaries would be submitted to the Commonwealth Parliament with a request to recognise the new states.

But delegates raised doubts immediately, especially over timing. Although Page as leader had a strong personal network throughout the movement, he was not in complete control of the conspiracy, which had become increasingly diverse with the addition of Hardy and others. Page wanted to set a definite date for action, but Hardy (no longer an antipodean Cromwell) managed to persuade them all to wait for one more “overt act” by Lang. Page described Hardy as having been “theatrical” at this meeting: the leader of the Western Movement, E.J. Body, was “timid.” The most Page could elicit was agreement on a coded telegram from the Executive to the various movements as the signal to implement the plan when the time finally came.<sup>65</sup> In public, Page broadcast by radio that if the Commonwealth government did not act to “reconstruct New South Wales and remove its rebel government”, then “the country men will be forced to take the lead themselves by creating their own governments who will obey the Federal law and Constitution, protect the people, develop resources, and defy the rebel elements in the community.”<sup>66</sup>

On 12 May Lang refused to comply with federal legislation enabling the Commonwealth to reclaim from New South Wales monies it had spent to meet the state’s debts, whereupon the state governor dismissed him. The immediacy with which this took the wind out of militant new statism implies much about its limited capacity to sustain Page’s ultimate national goals. There is no indication anywhere that resentment of Lang, intense as it was in rural New South Wales, amounted to a popular groundswell favouring unilateral independence of the north, the Riverina or anywhere else. Over a year earlier Sommerlad had informed Page that he “was rather surprised to find during my

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for what appears to be the same meeting, 8 April 1932 – and in his memoirs states 9 April 1932, *A Pen in Politics*, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

<sup>65</sup> Page, *ibid.*, pp. 245-6.

<sup>66</sup> *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate*, 21 April 1932, p. 8.

stay in the North that the secession idea is by no means as popular as we fondly imagined” and that “if a referendum were taken on the question of the new state, it would have no chance of being carried so far as the Tableland is concerned.”<sup>67</sup> Nor does it appear that the movement’s supporters had sufficient presence within local governments, police, essential services and other vital points to have been able to assert control. Ellis had noted in his diary the paucity of support from state MPs.<sup>68</sup> In his memoirs he also observed a decline in Riverina interest in a new state, which he attributed to the expectation that all would now be well once Lang was removed.<sup>69</sup> Page’s advocacy of rebellion had been all the more daring for being led by a militant few rather than by public demand.

The Lang dismissal, therefore, suddenly removed a shared focus from a narrow group of rebellious rural political, newspaper and business leaders. Page worked to a different dynamic than most new state sympathisers, who were reacting to short-term considerations of the condition of the rural economy and fear of Langism. These years provided him with an apparent opportunity to redesign the federal system that he promptly seized with little concern about its unorthodoxy. Page had greater ability than any of the other new state leaders to provide continuity and to attract wider attention (if not necessarily actual support), including through his dealings with more intellectual supporters such as Bland. He also had superior capacity to cope with day-to-day events and to propose strategy in response than did passing rivals like Hardy.

For over six years following Lang’s demise, Page again let new states and decentralisation drift as he, Bruxner and Drummond re-entered government and the Depression receded. His immediate focus from 1934 shifted to building a successful coalition with the UAP. Although Page found Lyons more pliable than Bruce had been, the Prime Minister’s engagement with new states remained inconsistent. Lyons in 1931-32 took some interest in a constitutional convention when it seemed likely that the Country Party would partner the UAP

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<sup>67</sup> Sommerlad to Page, 17 March 1931, Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 14, folder 51.

<sup>68</sup> Ellis diary, 27 February 1931, *op. cit.*

<sup>69</sup> Ellis, *A Pen in Politics*, *op. cit.*, pp.182-3.

in coalition. The shared policy program that he and Page produced in October 1931 included the elimination of overlapping federal-state powers, “new self-governing Federal units” and referenda on the division of New South Wales.<sup>70</sup> Soon after, Lyons drew on Peden’s findings of 1929 to propose clarification of the Constitution’s provisions on new states and in June 1933, as Prime Minister, tried unsuccessfully to interest the states in a constitutional convention.<sup>71</sup>

New statism gained one other proponent in the political mainstream during this decade – Bertram Stevens, Lang’s successor as Premier. Stevens showed distinct signs of taking cues from the Country Party, having a relationship with his coalition partner Bruxner that appeared closer than that with his UAP colleagues. Stevens came to office on a joint platform with the United Country Party that provided for a referendum on new states.<sup>72</sup> In March 1932 he used strikingly Page-like references when speaking on constitutional change, such as subdivision into new federal units and safeguards to prevent these putative entities from ever repudiating debt.<sup>73</sup> In February 1934 he succeeded in convening a conference of the state Premiers to discuss constitutional reform, only to have proceedings (according to Ellis) overshadowed by Western Australia’s announcement of intended secession.<sup>74</sup>

Stevens’s main contribution to the cause was the 1933-35 Nicholas Royal Commission, widely called the Boundaries Commission as it was restricted to delineating proposed new states. It defined two suitable areas: a northern state that included Newcastle, and a large central, western and southern region

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<sup>70</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 244, 249-50; the full text of the policy program is at p. 467.

<sup>71</sup> Speech by Lyons, 2 December 1931, A0001, New States, box 14, UNE Archives. The proposed convention is mentioned in an account by Ulrich Ellis of the history of constitutional conventions; see Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 22, series 7B, folder 97. For summaries of what was proposed and critical reactions by two states, see the *Advertiser*, 12 June 1933, p. 8, and the *Geraldton Guardian and Express*, 17 June 1933, p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> Ellis, *New Australian States*, *op. cit.*, pp. 222-3. On the Stevens-Bruxner relationship see Aitkin, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-3.

<sup>73</sup> Stevens speech on constitutional reform, 25 March 1932, New States, UNE Archives, A0001, box 14.

<sup>74</sup> Mentioned in an account by Ulrich Ellis of the history of constitutional conventions, Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 22, series 7B, folder 97. See the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 February 1934, p. 8, for a summary of this conference.

encompassing the Riverina, Wollongong and the south coast. Page wrote supportively, but Nicholas for the time being came to nothing. Most of the New South Wales UAP saw no pressing need for new states and Bruxner rejected a referendum in the north as likely to be defeated by a strong no vote from the Newcastle area.<sup>75</sup> In 1938-39 Stevens would be the only Premier to support Page's National Council planning initiative. Along with Richard Casey, he was the senior political figure most in tune with Page's developmentalist vision. Stevens later recalled that "over the years, I have felt that the name and entity of the Country Party correspond to something deep down in the consciousness of many thoughtful people, by no means confined to the rural areas."<sup>76</sup> Stevens and Casey encouraged Page, but over time both became so marginal in their own parliamentary parties that they could not provide the decisive support he needed.

Yet more than anyone, Page in these inter-war years reignited and upheld the idea of a new state in northern New South Wales. Although he could not maintain direct control of the wider new state movement as it diversified, he remained its most visible figurehead. Looking back on this period, Thompson implicitly criticized Page by opining that the movement's decisive failure was the lack of a clear lead from the Commonwealth government, such as by its not declaring a new state in Australia's far north.<sup>77</sup> Farrell has described Page, "the acknowledged leader of the New State movement", as a weak strategist.<sup>78</sup> These assessments are harsh. Few contemporary observers thought Page a poor political practitioner of day-to-day political arts. (Hughes did briefly, but soon learnt better).

Page's intermittent ambiguity regarding new states was not because he used the issue primarily for local advantage but had more to do with his obligations

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<sup>75</sup> See Ellis *A Pen in Politics*, *op. cit.*, pp. 197, 200; Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 438; also Aitkin, *The Colonel*, *op. cit.*, pp. 159, 163. Many new state activists did not want Newcastle and Wollongong included in new states. The main long-term legacy of Nicholas was that the 1967 northern new state referendum failed when a strong yes vote in the far north was indeed negated by opposition from around Newcastle.

<sup>76</sup> Stevens in the *Scrutineer and Berrima District Press*, 26 June 1948, p. 2. Stevens was writing rejecting post-war proposals to amalgamate the Liberal and Country Parties.

<sup>77</sup> From the account of the new state movement written by Thompson for Page, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> Farrell thesis, *op. cit.*, pp. 1, 29.

to the Bruce-Page and Lyons governments. His very different political standing from other advocates produced a special tension that he managed by assuming the role of national spokesman only when compatible with his status in parliament. Page's vision of an entire nation restructured along regional lines further distinguished him from the bulk of the movement and made him an important link to the wider regionalism that later evolved from new statism. Ellis and Thompson were among his few consistent allies as he outgrew northern New South Wales and put himself to the even harder task of the wider reorganization of all Australia into his federal units.

### **Rural higher education: Page's "spirit of Oxford or Cambridge"**

Involvement in the new state movement between the wars fortuitously drew Page to an important related issue. New state advocates had long contrasted educational facilities in rural areas, especially for higher education, with what was available in the cities. Most of the leading proponents of a new university to be located in Armidale, such as Drummond, were also ardent new staters. Their long campaign led to an appeal to Page to lend his support as the north's most prominent public figure. His subsequent involvement helped make him one of Australia's few political advocates of higher education as a valued end in itself.

When Page began his public career in the 1910s, mass primary education was already well-established. But public secondary education had barely begun, tertiary education on an appreciable scale was still decades away and the management of state education was centralized in capital cities.<sup>79</sup>

Campaigning by the Country Party and its antecedents for better educational opportunities in rural areas dated back to the 1890s and mainly concerned primary, technical and agricultural schooling.<sup>80</sup> Between the wars, this was particularly strong in New South Wales and acquired a focus on tertiary

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<sup>79</sup> Alison Mackinnon and Helen Proctor, 'education', in Bashford and Macintyre, volume 2, *op. cit.*, p. 432.

<sup>80</sup> James Belshaw, 'David Henry Drummond 1927-1941: A Case Study in the Politics of Education', in *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal and Proceedings*, no. 26, March 1983, p. 47.

education.<sup>81</sup> Cohen recommended that all new teachers colleges in the state be based in the countryside, that local government have a role in education and that consideration be given to a university for rural-based students.<sup>82</sup> These goals all received Drummond's support as state Education Minister 1927-30 and 1932-41, and led to the establishment of the Armidale Teachers' College in 1928.<sup>83</sup> Despite his longstanding commitment to education, Page was not especially prominent in early campaigning to establish rural tertiary institutions other than as an aspect of his engagement with new statism. Although he raised the absence of a university in the north in his evidence to Cohen, new state advocates such as Colin Sinclair and the indefatigable Thompson were more focussed on this.<sup>84</sup>

Page was asked to join the New England University cause just as it was becoming more organised a decade later. In July 1934 the secretary of the Provisional Council raising funds for a university college invited him both to join the Council and to lead a delegation to Drummond.<sup>85</sup> In November 1938, Page became Vice-Chairman of the Advisory Council for the newly-established New England University College, responsible to the University of Sydney as the College's parent body. This was alongside a solidly rural elite membership of local graziers, town representatives and Country Party figures that included the fellow new staters Phillip Wright and Bruxner.<sup>86</sup> Once fully on board, his political rank and familiar energy soon made him prominent. Drummond later wrote of Page's "great and widespread influence" as comparable to that of eminent Chancellors of Sydney University, Percival Halse Rogers and Charles Blackburn.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Alan Barcan, *A History of Australian Education*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1980, p. 244.

<sup>82</sup> Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>83</sup> See Matthew Jordan, *A Spirit of True Learning: the Jubilee History of the University of New England*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2004, pp. 19-20.

<sup>84</sup> Page's evidence to the Cohen Royal Commission, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-8; also Jordan, *ibid.*, pp. 25-6. Sinclair was a New England pastoralist who was the only member of the Cohen Royal Commission to support a new state.

<sup>85</sup> Letter from R.L. Blake and J. Laurence to Page, 17 July 1934, EPP, folder 1788.

<sup>86</sup> Page in *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 291, states that he was Chairman, but Jordan's official history of the UNE describes him as Vice-Chairman, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>87</sup> David Drummond, *A University is Born: The Story of the Founding of the University of New England*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1959, pp. xviii-xix, 70.

Campaigning for a fully-fledged University of New England led Page towards a personal conception of tertiary education that drew on his broader philosophy of rural community and of the appropriate scale of social institutions. He came to see rural-based universities not just as important local amenities, but also as means of community-building and shaping. Page told Drummond in late 1938 of how he saw the new institution in Armidale as having “an extraordinary influence ultimately on the development and concentration of rural thought in Australia.”<sup>88</sup> He added that:

It is by having in the centre of these northern districts an institution of this sort, with teachers able to make personal contact with the boys and girls that the full advantage of university life may be realised. Within universities such as this, there may be something of the spirit of Oxford or Cambridge, rather than London, for in big cities the commercial overrides the cultural life.<sup>89</sup>

This comment is significant not only as an early statement of his concept of an ideal university – small, rural and teaching-focused – but also as a fundamental statement of Page’s distaste for cities and commercialism.

Although there was little reaction to these views in the 1930s, they were the starting point of Page’s more developed contributions to the vigorous national debate on higher education of the 1940s and 1950s. The breadth of his vision of rural education based on scale and community went well beyond anything proposed by Drummond, the most prominent Country Party advocate of education during the inter-war years. Although always personally close to Page, Drummond was more conventionally orientated towards vocational education that met the immediate needs of particular regions and industries.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Page to Drummond, 6 December 1938, EPP, folder 1090.

<sup>89</sup> Page November 1938, quoted in Drummond, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>90</sup> Belshaw, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-2. Drummond also helped to found Junior Farmers’ Clubs to encourage young people to stay on the land, described in Bruxner’s paper ‘The Potentialities of Australian Agriculture’, undated, EPP, folder 2308. Under Bertram Stevens, Drummond tried unsuccessfully to regionalise technical education via district technical education councils; see Belshaw, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

**Transport and the Australian Agricultural Council: Page champions institutionalised co-operative federalism**

The 1930s proved more important for co-operative federalism than for new states or rural higher education, and provided Page with his foremost achievement of the decade. This did not start well, however, as Page began by trying to re-establish institutionalised co-operation in the fraught field of national transport. This mainly served to illustrate the difficulties involved, but did affirm him as Australia's prime advocate of co-operative federalism.

Page resumed his engagement with transport even before the Country Party re-joined the coalition by pushing the new Lyons government to revive the Federal Transport Council. In a 1932 booklet *The Case for Australia*, Page's admirer Ellis called for re-establishment of the Council so as to "view the whole transport system from the national aspect, regardless of state boundaries" by standardising railways, linking different transport modes and eliminating perceived distortions in rail rates caused by the focusing of routes on capital cities.<sup>91</sup> The Governor-General's speech at the opening of the new government's first parliament in February 1932 mentioned this Council, and Page in his address-in-reply called for its revival.<sup>92</sup> Public service advice to the Minister for the Interior in August 1932 acknowledged Page's pressure by warning that "apart altogether from the urgency of the problem, it is clear from recent press statements that the transport question will be made a live one by the Country Party immediately the House meets."<sup>93</sup>

Political receptiveness to a national transport body was improving. State governments in the early 1930s were increasingly concerned by financial losses inflicted on their rail systems by road transport, and raised this at a series of ministerial meetings. In September 1932, Lyons proposed the re-establishment of a ministerial council for transport. A June 1933 conference of

<sup>91</sup> Ulrich Ellis, *The Case for Australia: An Interpretation of the Policy of the Australian Country Party*, ACP, Sydney, 1932, pp. 7-11.

<sup>92</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 18 February 1932, pp. 95-6.

<sup>93</sup> 'Notes for Speech by the Minister for the Interior – the Federal Transport Council', NAA, A431 1946/888, Co-ordination of Transport in Australian Government Policy and Federal Transport Council Part 1 and 2.

transport ministers duly discussed creation of a new Federal Transport Council with a brief to promote national uniformity and conduct investigations, but served to illustrate the fragility of co-operative federalism by promptly falling foul of state suspicions that the Commonwealth intended to take over all railways.<sup>94</sup> Page almost alone continued to promote the institutionalised co-ordination of transport. In his policy speech for the 1934 election he proposed that a central purchasing authority set railway fares and uniform rates for the entire nation.<sup>95</sup> He later took time out from 1936 trade talks in London to cable Lyons about engaging Northcott, the chair of the 1929 Commonwealth Transport Committee, to conduct a study of overseas transport policy.<sup>96</sup>

To work, federal-led co-ordination needed either the imposition of the Commonwealth's fiscal power or a common self-interest in a clearly pressing national issue. Page harnessed the latter to promote the co-ordination of agricultural policy via the Australian Agricultural Council (AAC). As early as 1925 he had proposed a Commonwealth Department of Agriculture to co-ordinate the production and marketing of agricultural exports.<sup>97</sup> Creation of a Commonwealth-state entity took a decade longer and only after British trade policy provided a *casus belli*. Like most of his initiatives in this decade, it had its origins in Page's talent for turning an unexpected problem into an opportunity.

Early in 1933 the Lyons government received a proposal from the British government to cut imports of Australian dairy produce. Cabinet – still without Country Party members – reacted surprisingly favourably, reasoning that a smaller local industry would recover more quickly from the Depression. Page was temporarily absent from parliament at the time following the sudden death of his eldest son, Earle Jnr., killed by lightning in January 1933 when driving cattle to Heifer Station. Earle senior's detailed account in *Truant Surgeon* tells

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<sup>94</sup> Lyons to Premiers, 30 September 1932, EPP, folder 489; NAA, A659 1939/1/8829 Co-ordination of Transport in Australia – Government Policy and Federal Transport Council – Part 3; memo of 8 June 1935 reporting on conference of transport ministers, EPP, folder 495.

<sup>95</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 295.

<sup>96</sup> Cable Page to Lyons, 10 July 1936, EPP, folder 496.

<sup>97</sup> Undated minute 'Department of Agriculture', EPP, folder 2128. Ellis indicates it was prepared for Cabinet in 1925; see *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

of his receipt of vague news at the homestead of a bad accident followed by his rushing forth to the site of the tragedy to confirm the worst. He took nine months leave from active politics, an unprecedented period of absence for this otherwise tireless campaigner. Page came close to retiring from public life permanently: Drummond feared that if he did so the federal party would shrivel. Ethel Page suffered a stroke, but still continued her role in family and public life.<sup>98</sup>

This absence did not change Page's policy outlook nor, ultimately, his determination. He was aghast when he heard about Cabinet's reaction to the British proposal, not least as Grafton was a dairy producing area.<sup>99</sup> The major trade issue facing Australia at this time was trade diversification by Britain that restricted Australian exports, and so he riposted that the British should instead cut dairy imports from non-Empire nations. This led to his successfully proposing in a series of speeches over the following year the establishment of the AAC "on the lines of the Australian Loan Council", to "elevate agriculture to its proper place in our national life and make Australia realize its value and importance."<sup>100</sup> Page was drawing on his established ideas about co-ordinated national action to fight for the sector of the economy that mattered most directly to him.

Although the AAC had a partial forerunner in CSIR's research-oriented Standing Committee on Agriculture created in 1927, it is widely accepted Page was the main mover behind its establishment as a more powerful ministerial body. The Rural Reconstruction Commission, for example, later matter-of-factly described him as such.<sup>101</sup> Page assured the Graziers' Federal Council in

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<sup>98</sup> Drummond to Harold F. White, 31 January 1934, David Henry Drummond Papers, UNE Archives, A0248, V3010, folder B, part 4; see also Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 225-6, 263.

<sup>99</sup> Page, *ibid.*, pp. 268-9.

<sup>100</sup> Speech by Page at Bellingen, 21 March 1933, quoted in *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 269; also his 1934 election policy speech, referred to in Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

<sup>101</sup> Rural Reconstruction Commission, *Tenth Report, Commercial Policy in Relation to Agriculture*, The Commission, Canberra, 1946, p. 197. On the early history of the Standing Committee on Agriculture, see George Currie and John Graham, 'The Origins of the Standing Committee on Agriculture', *Public Administration*, vol. 27, no. 1, March 1968, pp. 23-38. The

December 1934 that the AAC was “purely a consultative and advisory body.”<sup>102</sup> But his other statements were more expansive. Ellis wrote of Page in October 1933 envisaging the AAC as determining general policy without imposing production controls, but still eliminating wasteful competition by determining which regions would focus on what crops.<sup>103</sup> In his 1934 election policy speech, Page called the AAC “a board of directors for Australian agriculture” that would “eliminate needless waste of public and private capital” and “counteract restriction policies.”<sup>104</sup> In a November 1934 Cabinet submission he made clear that although the British trade proposal was the immediate motivation for creating the AAC, the split of agricultural policy between the Commonwealth (exports) and the states (domestic production) necessitated a mechanism for their working together. Page foresaw “an intimate form of consultation between Commonwealth and states on the whole question of agricultural policy similar to the existing form of consultation in financial policy through the Loan Council.”<sup>105</sup> Privately, he wrote to his wife in March 1935 indicating that he dearly wanted a powerful planning body:

I think I have a chance to do for agriculture in Australia what I have already done for finance – only agriculture must be organised as well in its different industries in addition to having a national policy laid down and that takes a tremendous amount of time and knowledge to find out just what are the right lines and what is the right method to follow. But I feel that with the extraordinary capable head of the Department I have picked up in Murphy – who has a forward constructive courageous mind something like my own backed by an immense amount of knowledge he has acquired since the B/P [Bruce-Page] Govt established the Development Commission, that I will be able not merely to create an organisation but to breathe the breath of life into it so that it will grow into one of the fundamental factors [of] our national scheme of government and of progress.<sup>106</sup>

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committee was originally focussed on co-operation between the Commonwealth and states on research, and was created under the aegis of the CSIR.

<sup>102</sup> Page to Graziers' Federal Council, 5 December 1934, EPP, folder 183, part ii.

<sup>103</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

<sup>104</sup> Speech reproduced in *The Australian Country Party Monthly Journal*, 1 September 1934, p. 7.

<sup>105</sup> Cabinet paper 'Australian Agricultural Council', signed by Page, 20 November 1934, EPP, folder 182.

<sup>106</sup> Page letter to Ethel Page 10 March 1935, copy provided by Helen Snyders.

“Murphy” is J.F. (Frank) Murphy, Secretary of the Department of Commerce 1934-45, and one of the few public servants Page spoke of effusively.

The AAC was formally created at a December 1934 conference of agriculture and marketing ministers. It consisted primarily of agriculture ministers but with other ministers attending when necessary: the May 1935 inaugural meeting included Premiers and acting Premiers from all six states, plus two state attorneys-general. Supporting the ministers was the Standing Committee on Agriculture, comprised mainly of public service heads of agricultural agencies and CSIR’s executive leadership. Page himself agreed that agendas were to be prepared from submissions put forward by the states, plus (undefined) “subjects which directly affect the Commonwealth.”<sup>107</sup> Unlike the Loan Council, the AAC remained a voluntary organisation rather than a statutory body. Despite its origins in the need for a united response to a pressing trade issue, it was in practice more heavily engaged with domestic policy. The inaugural meeting worked its way through a long agenda that reads like a stocktake of issues, from the organisation of the dairy industry, to debt relief for farmers, the powers of marketing boards, soil erosion, wire netting, food preservation, the wheat Royal Commission and the grasshopper problem. The expansiveness evident here is suggestive of Page’s influence.

Although the AAC was never as powerful or planning-orientated as Page wanted, it quickly became central to agricultural policy and an important example of how co-ordinating machinery could smooth a complex, still unresolved federation. Transcripts of meetings record its cast of ministers and their most senior officials engaging in fulsome debate before agreeing on decisions. Victoria’s Agriculture Minister Edmund Hogan and his Queensland counterpart Frank Bulcock were especially vocal. From the start, the AAC promoted voluntary co-operative federalism by resolving that the states pass

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<sup>107</sup> Proceedings and Decisions of Council, Australian Agricultural Council, First Meeting, 28, 29, 30 May 1935’, p. 63, EPP, folder 2630.

nationally consistent legislation, such as a proposal at its first meeting to set restrictive terms for the marketing of margarine.<sup>108</sup>

The AAC succeeded largely as it was based on co-operation amongst equals, rather than the Page-led arrangement he had fondly imagined. Page was often the initiator, but his state counterparts did not hesitate to query his judgment. The biggest single issue facing the early AAC was the implications for orderly marketing legislation of section 92 of the Constitution prohibiting restriction on free trade between the states, specifically whether it invalidated Commonwealth orderly marketing legislation to the extent that this sought to regulate inter-state trade. At the inaugural meeting there were very mixed responses to Page's warning that "chaos will prevail" should the courts decide that section 92 did indeed apply to the Commonwealth, and his proposal for a referendum to alter this section. Victoria's Premier Albert Dunstan and Hogan bluntly warned of a failed referendum creating further problems; South Australia opposed compulsory schemes led by the Commonwealth; and Western Australia only reluctantly offered support. Proceedings ended in indecision by merely referring the issue to a committee of all Attorneys-General.<sup>109</sup>

The versatility of the AAC is reflected in Page using it to develop a national response to the 1934-36 Royal Commission on the Wheat, Flour and Bread Industries. This had been chaired by Herbert Gepp and was convened to inquire into costs of production and the wider conditions of the industry. The agreed response to its findings involved a home consumption price, compulsory marketing and the licensing of flour millers and warehouses, all to be organised jointly by the Commonwealth and the states.<sup>110</sup> Criticisms of the AAC only emerged a decade later: in 1946 the Rural Reconstruction Commission said it had "not realized the high hopes of its founder" due to

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27-8, EPP, folder 2630; and NAA, A11702 3, Agenda Items of the First Meeting of the Australian Agricultural Council, 28 May 1935. These terms concerned the colour of margarine so as to clearly differentiate it from butter.

<sup>109</sup> 'Proceedings and Decisions of Council, Australian Agricultural Council, First Meeting, 28, 29, 30 May 1935', *ibid.*, pp. 14, 23.

<sup>110</sup> See text on wheat marketing policy, briefing note on orderly marketing schemes prepared for the Rural Reconstruction Commission, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-4; also Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 274-5.

political considerations leading to the “absence of a really national outlook.”<sup>111</sup> The prominent agricultural scientist Samuel Wadham disparaged the Standing Committee as having proposed schemes “frequently difficult to administer or inequitable in their effects”, as some of its member Commonwealth officials “were not fully versed” in agricultural industries.<sup>112</sup>

The AAC was nonetheless much more successful than its transport counterpart. It was built on co-operation between governments in orderly marketing that dated back to the 1920s; government action was supported by producers; much agriculture competed internationally rather than nationally, easing interstate rivalry; industries that produce homogenous products tend to experience common problems; and the British trade issue provided a strong initial impetus. The AAC was to be the main single means by which Page consolidated co-operative federalism in policy formulation.<sup>113</sup>

Page was encouraged by the early success of the AAC. Typical of his optimism and ambition, in the *Australian Country Party Monthly Journal* of July 1935 he called for an array of voluntary co-ordinating councils to act as “a parliament of governments” that would serve as “a kind of super-Senate” across agriculture, transport, health and social services without the need to amend the Constitution.<sup>114</sup> Praise for Page’s efforts on co-operative federalism came from a prominent and familiar source, F.A. Bland. Speaking in 1935 on his efforts to revive the Federal Transport Council, Bland called for the

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<sup>111</sup> Rural Reconstruction Commission, *Tenth Report, Commercial Policy in Relation to Agriculture*, The Commission, Canberra, 1946, p. 197. The RRC concluded that although such a ministerial body was essential, to work well it needed to be backed by an industry-led hierarchy of local, state and national bodies down from farming industry representation and focused on the responsibilities of farmers rather than their perceived rights; see *Tenth Report*, p. 201.

<sup>112</sup> L.R. Humphries, *Wadham: Scientist for Land and People*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, 2000, p. 138. The AAC had post-war defenders such as public servant F.O. Grogan, who said it was “perhaps not an exaggeration to suggest it is the most successful example of such co-operation in Australian Commonwealth-State relationships”; see Grogan’s ‘The Australian Agricultural Council: A Successful Experiment in Commonwealth-State Relations’, in *Public Administration*, vol. 17, 1958, p. 12; and also J.G. Crawford, *Australian Agricultural Policy*, The Joseph Fisher Lecture in Commerce, The University of Adelaide, Adelaide, 1952, pp. 47-8.

<sup>113</sup> The AAC operated by its original name up to 1992. Its current equivalent is the Agriculture Ministers’ Forum.

<sup>114</sup> ‘Dr Page’s New Plan – National Co-ordination Councils – Parliament of Governments’, *The Australia Country Party Journal*, 1 July 1935, p. 3.

“elimination of political control” by using statutory policy commissions as advocated by Page.<sup>115</sup> He also praised Page in *Australian Quarterly*, then Australia’s main current affairs journal, for his roles in creating the Loan Council and the AAC, and how he had been “at considerable pains to popularize his ideas” by proposing similar new councils. Bland concluded that “these proposals of Dr Earle Page not only prelude an eventful chapter in working the Federal system, but offer unlimited possibilities for inventiveness in the arts of public administration.”<sup>116</sup> In a draft letter a few years later to Casey, then Treasurer, Page again mooted new bodies for co-ordination in transport and communications, so that the Commonwealth would “be able to call a national tune with some real harmony in it.”<sup>117</sup>

Page used the AAC to respond nationally to the most serious inter-war challenge to orderly marketing. The result showed the limitations of co-operative federalism and marked a change in his approach to constitutional reform. A South Australian dried fruit grower, Frederick James, so strongly objected to state and Commonwealth authorities seizing his shipments to enforce orderly marketing legislation regulating interstate trade that he pursued a long series of legal challenges right up to the Privy Council. In July 1936 the Council declared that section 92 of the Constitution applied to the Commonwealth, thereby striking down its legislation concerning the marketing of primary products. This decision, which came when Page was already struggling in trade talks with Britain over beef, validated his warnings. What followed gave him a focus for his determination to change the Australian Constitution, and drew forth a string of Page pronouncements that made him its leading public critic.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> F.A. Bland, *An Administrative Approach to Australian Transport Problems*, lecture to the New South Wales Centre of the Institute of Transport, Sydney, copy in EPP, folder 489.

<sup>116</sup> F.A. Bland, ‘Inventing Constitutional Machinery – a Study of Dr Earle Page’s Proposals for National Councils’, *Australian Quarterly*, December 1935, pp. 19, 21.

<sup>117</sup> Page to Casey, EPP, folder 407; undated draft, but evidently from 1938-39.

<sup>118</sup> Essentially, the orderly marketing schemes impacted by the James case had elevated domestic prices to compensate for low export prices, and imposed production quotas set by the states and export quotas set by the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth legislation also regulated interstate marketing, the focus of the Privy Council’s ruling. Henderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 370-7, provides a summary of the international trade difficulties facing the Lyons government at this time, which included the beef trade with Britain, and pursuit of new markets in the United States and Japan.

The James case led the AAC to finally accept Page's calls for a constitutional amendment. The resultant March 1937 referendum proposed enabling the Commonwealth to make laws on marketing without being inhibited by section 92, with a concurrent referendum to give it powers over air navigation and aircraft. Page in campaigning mode showed no reverence for the Constitution. He spoke of its "faulty wording" thwarting Commonwealth action and of how "no real democracy" would accept such restraints. The referendum was "a straight-out fight for the maintenance of Australian living standards."<sup>119</sup> Similarly, "it is obvious" that aviation was a continental rather than a local matter, despite which the states had failed to collectively legislate and the High Court had invalidated Commonwealth regulations. Page cast these referenda as harbingers of a "general Constitutional referendum" to fully revamp this troublesome document.<sup>120</sup>

Yet there turned out to be little public appetite for change. The question on marketing was rejected in all six states and the aviation referendum also failed, albeit less comprehensively. The strength of the 'no' votes was met with widespread bafflement. The *Sydney Morning Herald* postulated that it was simply a generalised protest against the Lyons government. Page concluded that in future the only way to educate the public and win approval for change was through a constitutional convention.<sup>121</sup> He had been supported by other ministers only to the extent of protecting orderly marketing: few echoed his wider doubts about the Constitution. Page had led a major revival of co-operative federalism but needed a specific and material issue to do so and could not extend this to broader constitutional reform. Following the failure of this referendum, the AAC spent 1938 successfully reformulating a coherent strategy for wheat based on complementary legislation by the Commonwealth and the states.

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<sup>119</sup> 'Statement by the Minister for Commerce (Dr Earle Page) 2nd March 1937', EPP, folder 934.

<sup>120</sup> Document titled 'Referendum Campaign', no author or date but wording and internal references clearly suggest Page 1937, EPP, folder 2140.

<sup>121</sup> Both comments from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 March 1937, p. 8.

It is again evident from Page's calls to protect orderly marketing that although such schemes were significant to him, he still treated them as a component of his wider view of the nation's workings. During the referendum campaign he linked orderly marketing to his long-standing concept of balancing the entire economy. The Commonwealth needed to regulate interstate trade so as to give primary producers protection comparable to that provided to manufacturers. Without farmers being able to afford to buy factory produce, manufacturing and ultimately the whole economy would falter: indeed, he considered this the cause of "the late Depression." Legislation had protected dried fruit and dairy producers since the 1920s by manipulating production and prices but had only lately been extended to wheat, hence the latter's persistent need to be subsidised.<sup>122</sup> Page maintained a wider policy vision than nearly all his Country Party colleagues, who at the time of the referendum were otherwise preoccupied with a home consumption price for wheat, the recommendations of a recent Royal Commission on Banking concerning rural loans, and yet another Victoria-based party rift over coalitions.

In the March 1935 letter to his wife, Page reflected on his work in creating the AAC as part of his higher calling. It was a fine example of a policy "which has an infinitely greater and more far reaching effect on the happiness and welfare of the people of Australia than any work I could do in my profession or running my own place." After dwelling briefly on the pressures he had faced in public life, he exulted in "the pleasure and the joy in altruistic constructive work that will lift the standards of living and comfort of us all and specially of the country people for ever and make certain that my spirit lives after I am gone." He concluded that "my spirit would rest better if I felt that the torch I have lighted and borne would still flame through the world perhaps to illumine it fully."<sup>123</sup> Page clearly retained the driving sense of special purpose that imbued his 1917 speech, viewing even the AAC as an inspiring opportunity to leave a legacy. Three years later, he was to attempt to implement a yet grander policy creation, the National Council.

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<sup>122</sup> Document titled 'Referendum Campaign', *op. cit.*

<sup>123</sup> Page to Ethel Page, 10 March 1935, *op. cit.*

### **Electrification reappears, late 1930s**

During the early to mid-1930s, Page's preoccupation successively with the northern new state, building a stable coalition with the UAP and establishing the AAC resulted in his standing back from the Clarence and electrification. He still saw electrification as an essential part of his vision, but was inhibited by a low level of wider political engagement with developmentalism and an absence of professional interest in hydroelectricity. When the Depression receded in the latter 1930s, Page resumed his pursuit of electrification as a key to national development. As with new states, he seized unexpected opportunities, briefly restoring him as Australia's foremost advocate of hydroelectricity.

The two initiatives he pursued involved very different approaches. One sought to exploit Imperial ties to gain access to technology and investment. The other involved working with Bertram Stevens and his New South Wales government to use state-owned railways as a basis for electrification. Both failed in ways suggesting that Page struggled to secure support from urban-based interests, a severe constraint on his nationwide ambitions. They also suggest that despite economic recovery in the late 1930s, there was less of a corresponding revival of the developmentalism that had characterised the 1920s. Ambitious development proposals wilted in the face of contrary vested interests: Australian optimism was to take several more years to recover.

During the 1930s, Australian policy on trade, migration and overseas investment remained cast in an Imperial context. In 1936 Australia adopted a trade diversion policy of discrimination against Japanese and US exporters in favour of British suppliers, the aim being to secure better access to the British market by offering tariff concessions on British manufactures.<sup>124</sup> Page went along with this strategy, challenging it only at the margins such as by occasionally proposing migration and tourism from the United States and continental Europe.<sup>125</sup> But while in Britain in 1936 for trade talks on meat, he

<sup>124</sup> Bongiorno in Bashford and Macintyre, volume 2, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

<sup>125</sup> See for example his 1929 exchange of letters with Leslie H. Perdrian of Cambridge, Massachusetts, on how to promote Australia as a tourist destination; Earle Page papers, UNE

digressed into proposing a trade and investment agreement more directly geared to his idea of Australian development. He pursued via the Board of Trade what even he called an ambitious scheme for electrification based on British technology, finance and migration.

Page had long seen the Imperial connection as a powerful platform for Australian development. As long ago as September 1920, he and Corin had corresponded on working with the Canadians to convene an Imperial conference “on the question of water power in the Empire.”<sup>126</sup> Page now sought to harness British interest in direct overseas investment in manufacturing and in co-ordinating industrial development within the Empire, both responses to the Depression-related breakdown of multilateral trade.<sup>127</sup> Although based on the Imperial connection, Page’s strategy is broadly consistent with A.T. Ross’s interpretation of Australian trade policy of the time as being driven more by national development policy than by Imperial sentiment.<sup>128</sup>

Page and the Board of Trade tentatively agreed on the tariff-free entry of advanced heavy capital equipment into Australia for at least ten years, the resumption of large-scale British migration, and either the British Electrical Association or the British government itself arranging a long-term loan to extend “electrical reticulation” throughout Australia.<sup>129</sup> “The heads of electrical manufacturing concerns,” Page later recalled, offered to “bring out 58,000 migrants drawn from all classes and make available £30 million to enable governments to increase their electricity supplies and expand reticulation if they received certain concessions concerning the admission of major and very specialised electrical equipment”.<sup>130</sup> This proposal had a strong precedent

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Archives, A0180, Box 10, folder 78. On attracting migrants from the United States, see a report from the Australian National Travel Association representative in Los Angeles, August 31 1938, EPP, folder 2121.

<sup>126</sup> Corin to Page, 17 September 1920, EPP, folder 400.

<sup>127</sup> Cochrane, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>128</sup> See A.T. Ross, ‘Australian Overseas Trade and National Development Policy 1932-1939: A Story of Colonial Larrikins or Australian Statesmen?’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1990, pp. 184-204.

<sup>129</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

<sup>130</sup> Speech 28 July 1958, Perth, National Party papers, NLA, MS 7507, series 1, box 1.

dating from the 1920s when British legislation guaranteed finance for power development overseas that used British-produced plant.<sup>131</sup> Now Page was taking it upon himself to revive singlehandedly the Migration Agreement.

Page claimed to have secured the support of British industry and of all but one of Australia's state manufacturing associations. He fully expected them to proceed to resolve amongst themselves such details as the technical definitions of specific goods.<sup>132</sup> He was mortified to instead find his ambitious plan "blocked by certain Australian manufacturing interests."<sup>133</sup> He publicly blamed the engineer and UAP state parliamentarian F.P. Kneeshaw, long a public critic of the Ottawa Agreement's concessions to Britain and president of the only state association opposed to Page's proposal, the New South Wales Chamber of Manufactures.<sup>134</sup> In a speech of July 1958 to the Country Party Federal Executive recounting his long engagement with electrification, Page attributed this failure more fundamentally to lack of national ambition: "Australia failed to take up the offer, which typifies what still could be done if the will exists."<sup>135</sup>

Page's only significant domestic ally on electrification during the late 1930s was Stevens. Page accordingly explored what he could achieve via the government of New South Wales. In his policy speech for the 1935 state election, Stevens declared an intention to create a statewide grid based on coal and hydroelectricity, including the Nymboida facility and new hydroelectric plants on the Shoalhaven and other rivers.<sup>136</sup> The Premier's convergent agenda encouraged Page to resume a longstanding interest in using New South Wales railways as a basis for rural electrification, something he first explored during

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<sup>131</sup> Cochrane, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>132</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, p. 282.

<sup>133</sup> Note of 30 January 1950 on the new Department of National Development, EPP, folder 2072.

<sup>134</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, p. 283. Kosmas Tsokhas provides an account of Page's negotiations in 1936 on electricity imports that focuses on the reciprocal link to Australian primary product exports, but does not address in any detail Page's electrification and developmentalist goals. See *Markets, Money and Empire, op. cit.*, pp. 12, 100-1.

<sup>135</sup> Speech 28 July 1958, *op. cit.*

<sup>136</sup> Wigmore, *Struggle for the Snowy: The Background of the Snowy Mountains Scheme, op. cit.*, p. 93.

the 1920s.<sup>137</sup> The New South Wales Railways and Tramways Department had played a central role in electrification during the early twentieth century, partially acting as a statewide electricity authority by using its generators to supply power in bulk to local government distribution authorities.<sup>138</sup> In the late 1930s New South Wales had no less than six different electricity providers, including one focussed on hydroelectricity.<sup>139</sup>

In November 1936, Page sought an opinion on rural electrification from Tim Clapp, a favoured Page sounding board in the business world. Clapp's advice was that the only practical strategy was through "electrification of part of the main lines of the New South Wales Government Railways." But he added that the load was too small to enable electricity to be supplied at low cost: as ever, sparse population and distance were fundamental constraints.<sup>140</sup> Yet just two months later, Stevens submitted an ambitious plan to his Cabinet that drew on discussions with Page and his own recent visits to Sweden and Britain. This proposed rural electrification using "tapering subsidies", flagged a new Central Power Authority empowered to raise its own funds and reported that the state's Electricity Advisory Committee was preparing a long-term strategy to link major power stations.<sup>141</sup>

Page's political colleagues showed little interest in such ambitions. An April 1939 conference in Sydney of Commonwealth and state ministers on water conservation and irrigation called for Commonwealth funding and a nationwide

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<sup>137</sup> See memo of 27 November 1926, EPP, folder 1046 – unsigned, but its policy prescription of "rural reticulation" by linking power stations and railways electrification suggests it was written by Page or for his use.

<sup>138</sup> See Butlin, Barnard and Pincus, *op. cit.*, pp. 254-5; also 'Memorandum on the Development and Organisation of the Electricity Supply Industry in New South Wales', by H.R. Harper, formerly Chief Engineer, State Electricity Commission of Victoria, 1938, p. 2, EPP, folder 1059.

<sup>139</sup> These were Sydney County Council for most of the metropolitan area; the Electric Light and Power Supply Corporation Ltd for some parts of inner Sydney; the Department of Railways and Tramways for trains, trams and some councils; the Department of Public Works, operating as the Southern Electric Supply; the Tamworth system covering the state's north-west; and Clarence River County Council for the north coast of New South Wales. See Allbut, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-2. A central power authority appeared only gradually in New South Wales, between 1938 and 1950.

<sup>140</sup> Clapp to Page, 17 November 1936, EPP, folder 2086.

<sup>141</sup> Cabinet minute by Stevens, 12 January 1937, EPP, folder 2612. That Page's personal papers include a copy of a New South Wales cabinet document is indicative of his ties to Stevens.

survey of water resources but barely mentioned hydroelectricity.<sup>142</sup> Page, caretaker Prime Minister at the time, did not attend. Stevens was removed from the Premiership by opponents within his own party in August 1939, partly in consequence of his being considered too close to the Country Party.<sup>143</sup>

### **The National Council planning initiative, 1938-39: Page sets out to shape the nation**

Page's last major policy initiative of the 1930s also arose from an unexpected opportunity, this time mounting defence concerns. The National Council planning proposal of 1938-39 was a determined effort to recreate the DMC in a more powerful form. It was his most ambitious attempt to embed his vision of Australia's development by changing the very fundamentals of policymaking. He concentrated his formidable energy onto this effort, only to find its failure commensurately dismaying. The whole episode is well documented, including a full transcript of the October 1938 conference with the Premiers at which Page first sought their commitment.

The National Council initiative briefly held the attention of the Commonwealth and all state governments. It helped to make economic planning an issue that lingered intermittently for the next two and half decades. Yet it is mentioned only in a few histories of the period. Most accept without question that it was driven by defence considerations. Even the most detailed account, that by Paul Hasluck, does not fully recognise Page's dominant role and developmentalist aims, which were partially obscured by overlapping machinations concerning defence preparedness.<sup>144</sup> An appreciation of Page's

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<sup>142</sup> *Interstate Conference on Water Conservation and Irrigation: Held at Sydney, New South Wales 24th to 27th April, 1939*, Government Printer, Sydney, 1939, copy at EPP, folder 2111.

<sup>143</sup> Aitkin, *The Colonel*, *op. cit.*, pp. 223-36.

<sup>144</sup> Hasluck's account is in his *The Government and the People 1939-41*, a volume in the official history of Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 4 Civil, volume 1, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1952, pp. 125-37. Anne Henderson in her biography of Lyons provides a summary account that acknowledges Page's dominant role and interest in national development, *op. cit.*, pp. 414-5. Most later accounts of Australian foreign and defence policy do not cover the National Council at all. They do however invariably note that post-1939 Page was coy about his support for appeasement; see for example E.M. Andrews, *Isolationism and Appeasement in Australia: Reactions to the European Crises 1935-1939*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1970, p. 141.

wider thinking and of the course of events makes it very evident that the foremost driver was his planning-based decentralist agenda. His asserting himself over his Prime Minister to call two conferences of state Premiers on this issue was the high water mark of Page's political influence in the 1930s but also marks the start of his decline. This singular episode is also an illuminating case study of Page's *modus operandi*, notably his blunt attempts to win over political colleagues and the states, and his misplaced optimism that business leaders would empathise with his developmentalist goals.

A new planning body had been proposed by Opposition Leader John Latham in late 1930 as a non-party "economic council" that could take charge during the crisis of the Depression, to be made up of federal and state political leaders, including Page, and of bankers. The then acting Treasurer Joseph Lyons raised the idea with the Labor Caucus, which was reported to have reacted with derision, possibly as members suspected collusion with the Opposition.<sup>145</sup> The Loan Council and Premiers' Conferences acted as an economic council during the Depression, but Page later publicly dismissed the deflationary Premiers' Plan of 1931 as "an accountant's plan, not a statesman's plan" that misguidedly tried to "tax people into prosperity."<sup>146</sup> Revival of a DMC-like agency as a more powerful tool of developmentalism was one of his first proposals after the demise of the Scullin government. In February 1932 he told the Constitutional Association of New South Wales that because of unplanned and unbalanced development, "we had peacocked industry as we had peacocked settlement."<sup>147</sup>

Over the following two years, Page repeatedly called for a powerful Federal Export Council of federal and state ministers as a statutory authority "formed on the lines of the Loan Council, and given status and powers in the same way so far as the exporting industries are concerned" to "rationalise their activities...[and]...direct our marginal producers into more profitable and stable

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<sup>145</sup> Cochrane, *op. cit.*, p. 126; see the *Examiner* (Launceston), 11 December 1930, p. 7, for a detailed account of the reaction of Caucus.

<sup>146</sup> Quoted in a profile of Page in the *Daily Telegraph*, 14 August 1948, pp. 10-1. On the Loan Council and Premiers' Conferences, see McMinn. *op. cit.*, p. 175.

<sup>147</sup> Speech by Page of 15 February 1932 to the Constitutional Association, EPP, folder 384.

lines of activity.” It would market their produce and “ensure for a definite term a payable Australian price”, which would later come down as lower tariffs reduced costs. This would be quite unlike “the hopeless policy [of] giving bounties year after year to the wheat industry.” Typically for a Page initiative, he based the Federal Export Council on a more topical issue, tariff reform. He tied the lowering of tariffs not just to “harmony between the prices of the farm and the factory goods” but also to the restoration of world trade as “lowered tariffs will enable investment by creditor nations of their capital in equipment of debtor nations, and the debtor countries will be able to pay their interest again in the form of goods.”<sup>148</sup>

The Federal Export Council idea and planning generally attracted little political reaction in the early 1930s. Governments were more preoccupied with fiscal restraint. Later in the decade, rearmament and intellectual interest in planning gave Page a firmer basis for his National Council initiative. In brief, Page in 1938-39 sought to enlist ministers and experts from business and government with knowledge of manufacturing, agriculture, defence and engineering to direct industry, trade, transport and energy policy across a timespan of several years. The resultant planning body would “ignore state boundaries” in guiding the location of industries and the prioritisation of public works as it mounted an “attack [on] the causes of excessive population in the vulnerable centres.”<sup>149</sup> Although bracketing development with defence was not a new idea in Australia, this was usually stated in simpler terms of the size and distribution of the nation’s population, particularly in the sparsely populated north. Page’s distinctive approach was to use growing security concerns as the basis for seeking to plan the entire economy.

Tentative moves to ready the nation for war began in 1935 when the Australian government consulted the states and industry on the content of the

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<sup>148</sup> ‘Federal Export Council Proposed by Dr Earle Page for Continuous Australian Policy’, speech by Page of 20 November, 1933 to the Triennial Convention of the Australian Country Party Association, David Henry Drummond Papers, UNE Archives, A0248, V3010, folder 2(c). See also ‘Speech by the Rt. Hon. Dr Earle Page MP, P.C., at the Western Divisional Conference of the United Country Party at Orange on Thursday February 22 1934’, EPP, folder 1101.

<sup>149</sup> ‘Memorandum to Cabinet’, 18 October 1938, EPP, folder 1114.

Commonwealth War Book. This was a detailed set of procedures to be followed upon the outbreak of war, such as air raid preparedness and guarding essential industries. By the time Page proposed the National Council in September 1938, preparations had already spawned an array of expert planning committees of officials, economists and business leaders. An Advisory Committee on Financial and Economic Policy included the leading economists L.F. Giblin, Roland Wilson and Leslie Melville, and mobilisation of secondary industry sat with an advisory panel chaired by BHP's general manager Essington Lewis. Page would have been encouraged by increases in defence expenditure initiated by Lyons and Casey in 1937, a marked shift from the austerity of the previous few years as unemployment fell to ten per cent. This included a December 1937 Cabinet direction to the Department of Works to give priority to defence projects.<sup>150</sup> Total defence expenditure climbed from 5.5 per cent of annual expenditure in 1933-34 to 9.4 per cent in 1936-37 and 14.9 per cent by 1938-39.<sup>151</sup>

Page also drew on the growing intellectual interest in planning that arose from the search for responses to the Depression, bringing him into a rare alliance with economists. Planning was the focus of the Australian Institute of Political Science's second summer school, held in Canberra in January 1934. Page was not amongst the event's diverse cast of public policy intellectuals that included G.V. Portus, W. Macmahon Ball, Lloyd Ross, E.O.G. Shann, Leslie Melville, The Reverend E.H. Burgmann, Alan Watt, Bland, Wilson and Giblin. Discussion ranged from doubt about the very concept of economic planning to admiration for the USSR, but there was broad support for some limited form of planning on grounds of efficiency and equity.<sup>152</sup> (Bland was one of the few sceptics).<sup>153</sup> Two participants, Wilson and Giblin, were later important players

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<sup>150</sup> A.T. Ross, *Armed and Ready: The Industrial Development & Defence of Australia 1900-1945*, Turton & Armstrong, Sydney, 1995, pp. 113-5, 118. Geoffrey Sawer in *Australian Federal Politics and Law 1901-1929*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, 1956, p. 86, summarises how economic indicators improved in 1936-37.

<sup>151</sup> Henderson, *op. cit.*, p. 398.

<sup>152</sup> Proceedings were published in W.G.K. Duncan (ed.), *National Economic Planning*, Angus and Robertson in conjunction with the Australian Institute of Political Science, Sydney, 1934.

<sup>153</sup> See F.A. Bland, *Planning the Modern State*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, second edition 1945 (first published 1934). Despite its title, this book was mainly about improving the quality

in Page's National Council proposal. In November 1938 Giblin prepared a short paper for the Prime Minister supporting a "general plan for national reorganisation" of the Commonwealth and the states as essential in this "new era, in which concentrated and planned effort will have to be made by the people of all the democracies if they are to have a chance to survive."<sup>154</sup> Page was also aware of ideas about planning circulating in British intellectual circles. He borrowed G.D.H. Cole's 1935 *Principles of Economic Planning* from the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library, of which he was an enthusiastic patron.<sup>155</sup> (Cole called for the full public ownership of industry, something Page found abhorrent). In Britain the typical proposed goal of economic planning was to stave off crisis by rescuing capitalism from itself: in Australia, Page wanted to engineer the nation at last to fulfil its potential.<sup>156</sup>

A more immediately important factor in the National Council proposal was Page's political ascendancy. The late 1930s was a Page purple patch. By 1938 he had built a strong personal relationship with Lyons. Enid Lyons recalled that Page was so close to her husband that it was rumoured to be the only known instance of Page being completely loyal to anyone else.<sup>157</sup> His determined efforts to promote the National Council proposal to colleagues and industry confirm the impression given in *Truant Surgeon* that he was only too willing to fill the vacuum created by Lyons's political and physical decline that eventually led to early death from coronary occlusion.<sup>158</sup>

Page in his memoirs recalled returning from trade talks in Britain in 1938 convinced war was inevitable. He at once "began exploring means of co-ordinating Federal and State capital expenditure on defence and development

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of public administration. Bland remained critical of centralised planning as "incompatible with the enjoyment of popular liberties"; see for example pp. 67-8.

<sup>154</sup> L.F. Giblin, 'The National Need', November 1938 (no specific date), EPP, folder 2082; see also Hasluck, *op. cit.*, p. 130. Australian interest in planning drew on British interest; see Pemberton, 'The Middle Way...', *op. cit.*

<sup>155</sup> Parliamentary Librarian to Page, 10 July 1935, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, Box 1, folder 3.

<sup>156</sup> For accounts of British conceptions of planning see Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain Between the Wars*, Allen Lane, London, 2009, pp. 77-86; and Pemberton, 'The Middle Way...', *op. cit.*

<sup>157</sup> Enid Lyons, *Among the Carrion Crows*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1972, p. 75.

<sup>158</sup> See Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

and of allocating priorities to indispensable projects.”<sup>159</sup> Although this started with a proposal for agreement with the states to prioritise public works according to their defence value, the documentation that Page generated dwells far more on his decentralist and developmentalist goals. There is no indication that he corresponded similarly with defence experts. Page’s proposal also closely matched his DMC-inspired model for planning, including use of business leaders as advisers and formal machinery for co-ordination between levels of government. What followed is a fine example of Earle Page in full flight, utterly determined to seize an opportunity he had hoped for since the glory days of the Bruce-Page government.

In October 1938 Page forcefully told the Lyons Cabinet of the need to prepare for war by proposing that “the Federal Government gives a lead and secures the complete co-operation of the other governments and the industrial leaders.” To this end, he produced what is arguably his *magnum opus*, a memo that was a concentrated statement of self-belief devoid of any consideration of alternatives or foreseeable barriers.<sup>160</sup> Australia’s security necessitated not just the wise use of funds for defence procurement: Page also wanted “industrial development in the widest national sense” to mobilise national resources and attract millions of new settlers. As funding through loans was limited, “the height of wisdom is to plan the spending in the best possible way” by carefully identifying industries for expansion and planning their location at the least vulnerable points, with “the best distribution of population.”<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301.

<sup>160</sup> This confidential memo, evidently prepared for Cabinet, is entitled ‘Financial Problems of Australian Defence and Development.’ It is the earliest of the key documents generated by Page’s National Council proposal. It was clearly written by Page himself (or at least under his close supervision), containing as it does characteristic such phraseology as “reproductive purposes” and “it is obvious”. He proposes what was formally put to state Premiers on 21 October 1938. An opening reference to “the lessons of the last fortnight” reflects its preparation just after the Munich Agreement of September 1938. See EPP, folder 2121; copies marked October 1938 and bearing Page’s signature are at folder 1877 (i). Page’s statement to the House outlining his plans drew heavily on this document; see *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 19 October 1938, pp. 903-5. Page also produced a memo to Cabinet dated 18 October 1938 that provides further details of his intentions, EPP, folder 1114. The quote is from ‘Financial Problems of Australian Defence and Development’, p. 1.

<sup>161</sup> ‘Financial Problems of Australian Defence and Development’, *ibid.*, pp. 1, 2.

All this would require state co-operation to plan jointly the “next seven or ten years” across all sectors of the economy.<sup>162</sup> New secondary industries would be sited at sources of raw materials, especially near seaports: Page thought it fortunate that many potential Australian ports were close to power sources, such as the Clarence River. A national electricity system would charge flat rates as a “prime necessity for the decentralisation of industry.”<sup>163</sup> Planning would apply such tools as uniform railway gauges, tax privileges, new ports and manufacturing distribution centres, guided by “experts who have the confidence of all Australia.”<sup>164</sup> As the international political environment darkened, “now is the psychological moment for a definite call to national service, a national outlook, and a national programme.”<sup>165</sup> Reviewing the whole economy would also be consistent with agreement at the 1938 trade talks with Britain to assess Australia’s lines of development of secondary industry so as to help frame trade policies.<sup>166</sup> As Page hoped to enshrine national development above party politics, he gave Opposition leader John Curtin an advance copy of his statement to parliament on all this. Curtin noted the lack of detail but approved sufficiently to claim credit for the ALP in first proposing machinery for collaboration with the states on public works.<sup>167</sup>

Page was indeed initially vague on how exactly this planning would be organised. It shortly became evident he had in mind appointment by the Loan Council of a powerful joint advisory committee of Commonwealth and state officials and of business leaders.<sup>168</sup> This would undertake a “survey of the lines which Australian industrial development should follow from now on.”<sup>169</sup> It would then submit recommendations to the Loan Council on the prioritisation of public works, including those not directly associated with defence. The most important would be “reproductive” – electricity, road, railway, seaport and

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<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2. Page also expressed interest here in migration from continental Europe.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>164</sup> ‘Memorandum for Cabinet’, 18 October 1938, *op. cit.*

<sup>165</sup> ‘Financial Problems of Australian Defence and Development’, *op. cit.* p. 2.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2. See Page *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 470-1, for the relevant part of the formal conclusions of these talks.

<sup>167</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 19 October 1938, pp. 905-7.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 October 1938, pp. 903-5.

<sup>169</sup> Lyons speech to 21 October 1938 conference of Premiers, in *Conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers on National Co-operation for Defence and Development, Proceedings of Conference*, p. 3, copy in EPP, folder 581.

communications projects likely to stimulate production.<sup>170</sup> Page was effectively recasting the Loan Council as a more powerful version of the DMC with a direct say in developmental expenditure.

Page broached his initiative with the convalescent Prime Minister on 10 October 1938. In order to overcome “the Loan Council deadlock”, Page sought his agreement to a joint meeting of the Commonwealth, states, industry and Opposition to “combine in one big progressive programme the Defence activities, the investigation of the plan of industrial development that the delegation arranged with the British Ministers [and] an enquiry into the location of the suggested new industries.”<sup>171</sup> He also canvassed an old colleague. Page wrote to Stanley Bruce, now Australian High Commissioner in London, clearly indicating that defence preparedness provided an opportunity to pursue developmental planning. “It has been quite obvious for some time that the Financial Agreement and the Loan Council would break down except something is done which would give real priority to worthwhile works,” for which “the Defence problem gives us an opportunity of putting this issue on to a plane that the general public can understand.” Hence his proposing to co-opt “a body of first class business minds for a year or two.”<sup>172</sup>

But attracting the interest of business leaders, always Page’s preferred collaborators, proved difficult. He wrote to Essington Lewis, Tim Clapp and to Sir Clive McPherson, the pastoralist. The letter to Lewis of 13 October 1938 is one of the most ambitious Page ever wrote. In order to achieve something “of real and enduring value” for the nation he was seeking “the collaboration of the captains of industry in Australia, who have real vision”, and asked for suggested names.<sup>173</sup> Lewis’s reply was cold. He had spoken with Robert Menzies (Minister for Industry and Attorney-General) and T.W. White (Minister for Trade and Customs), and thought the government already had access to

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<sup>170</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 19 October 1938, p. 904.

<sup>171</sup> Page to Lyons, 10 October 1938, EPP, folder 1621.

<sup>172</sup> Page to Bruce, 12 October 1938, EPP, folder 407.

<sup>173</sup> Page to Lewis, 13 October 1938; to McPherson, 14 October 1938; to Clapp, 12 October 1938; all EPP, folder 407.

the “leading men.”<sup>174</sup> Clapp and McPherson replied jointly that they would participate only if satisfied that the Commonwealth and states would endorse the recommendations of the “Board of Control” – a near impossible precondition.<sup>175</sup>

The bureaucracy showed more enthusiasm. Page had a detailed memorandum prepared by three senior officials – Murphy of his Department of Commerce, Stuart McFarlane, Secretary of the Treasury, and Roland Wilson, now Commonwealth Statistician.<sup>176</sup> At the AIPS summer school four years earlier, Wilson had called for indicative planning which maintained private property and the profit motive, but with a “central thinking agency” supervising the private sector.<sup>177</sup> The three public servants now proposed a ten-year plan of co-operative action by the Commonwealth and the states, starting by determining which industries to expand and their locations. The memorandum was sent to all states for consideration.

It says much about Page’s influence in Cabinet that he secured support for his ill-defined and overstretched proposal. He was even confident that public opinion could force the states to co-operate.<sup>178</sup> Page dismissed likely criticism: the CSIR, the Loan Council, and the NHMRC, he said, were all once “ridiculed as impossible.”<sup>179</sup> Page proceeded with two concerted attempts to secure the co-operation of the states. The first was the Conference of Commonwealth and state Ministers on National Co-operation for Defence and Development, convened in the House of Representatives chamber on 21 October 1938. All six state governments attended, including four Premiers. Discussions were hampered by hurried preparation and a concurrent Loan Council meeting. Page’s immediate aim was to have the states agree to participate in the advisory committee to the Loan Council. The results fell far short of his hopes.

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<sup>174</sup> Lewis to Page, 17 October 1938, EPP, folder 407. Lewis did briefly list candidate industries for expansion, ranging from cotton and canned vegetables, to aluminium and shipbuilding. He added that extra protection would be required for them to be decentralised.

<sup>175</sup> Clapp to Page, 18 October 1938, EPP, folder 1621.

<sup>176</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

<sup>177</sup> Duncan, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>178</sup> ‘Memorandum for Cabinet’, *op. cit.*; also Page to Bruce, 12 October 1938, EPP, folder 407.

<sup>179</sup> ‘Necessity for Planning’, undated, EPP, folder 2110.

The conference presented a stark contrast between the energetic Page and a Prime Minister in terminal decline. Lyons, “tired, dispirited and ill,” was flown in from his sickbed in Devonport<sup>180</sup> Even as he arrived in Canberra he knew the proposal in broad outline only: Page briefed him on the details during the drive from the airport. Lyons’s opening speech was only half ready as he began to deliver it, obliging him to speak slowly while it was typed up and handed to him leaf by leaf.<sup>181</sup> The assembled state ministers would surely have been unimpressed. Even worse, a list of priority projects prepared by the Defence Department was not ready for presentation.<sup>182</sup> Lyons instead broadly outlined how the advisory committee would draft a program “of future industrial development” and “an order of priority of public works.” Commonwealth and state experts could begin by meeting at defence headquarters in Melbourne.<sup>183</sup>

The reaction of the states demonstrated that their fear of loss of authority crossed party lines and outweighed any interest in planning. Dunstan of Victoria was Page’s Country Party colleague but argued that the advisory committee should be denied substantive powers and exclude industrialists. Richard Butler of South Australia had similar concerns, despite being willing to countenance decentralisation “if that can be done economically.”<sup>184</sup> Page himself was widely mistrusted. Initially he kept uncharacteristically quiet and later wrote that discussions were well advanced before the Premiers “recognised me as the author.” Two advisers, Douglas Copland from Victoria and Colin Clark of Queensland, wanted to know why his role hadn’t been made clear at the outset.<sup>185</sup> William Forgan Smith, the Labor Premier of Queensland, thought that the states risked coercion reminiscent of Page’s abolition when Treasurer of their per capita grants. (This drew an indignant reply from Page that the states had been glad of the Loan Council ever since).<sup>186</sup> Page’s sole

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<sup>180</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

<sup>181</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 302-3.

<sup>182</sup> Defence Minister Thorby had just a week before asked his department to prepare a report on public works of defence value. Cabinet only considered the resultant schedule on the day of the conference, and directed that it be revised to list projects in priority order. See Hasluck, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>183</sup> *Conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>184</sup> See *ibid.* pp. 6-7 and 9-11 for comments by Dunstan and Butler.

<sup>185</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

<sup>186</sup> *Conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

supporter was Bertram Stevens, who had already advocated Page's plan in a radio speech ten days earlier. But even he was concerned by the proposed advisory committee and wanted an assurance of additional finance, including Commonwealth measures to secure the co-operation of the banks.<sup>187</sup>

The conference floundered its way to a non-committal agreement by the states to "examine the possibility of undertaking, within the limits of the local allocation of that state, any work of defence submitted by the Commonwealth."<sup>188</sup> The whole meeting had lasted two hours, despite allowance for two days. "Received cautiously by some Premiers" was the understated summary in the Commonwealth's press release of the next day. This reported that the advisory committee had been deferred rather than rejected and that the Commonwealth would seek "a Committee with abridged powers" at the next meeting with the Premiers.<sup>189</sup> Press coverage was blunter. The *Sydney Morning Herald* editorialised on Page's "disposition to obscure the substance of his proposals in a cloud of idealistic generalities."<sup>190</sup> The Melbourne *Argus* reported a "sometimes acrimonious discussion" that was a "setback to Sir Earle Page." (It later added that one Premier had been anxious to leave for Melbourne to attend a race meeting – Dunstan, no doubt).<sup>191</sup> But Stevens wrote to Lyons promising manpower and appointing a committee to examine "the organisation that would be set up to give effect to these proposals."<sup>192</sup> In parliament Page was reduced to attacking "lying stories of intrigue."<sup>193</sup>

Page was not one to give up on something he had sought for so long. An unsigned and evidently draft Cabinet memo, probably prepared by Page or at least for his use, stated a determination to appoint an expert committee

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<sup>187</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 302; *Conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers*, *ibid.*, pp. 4-8.

<sup>188</sup> *Conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers*, *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>189</sup> 'For Press', 22 October 1938, EPP, folder 583.

<sup>190</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 October 1938, p. 10.

<sup>191</sup> *Argus*, 22 October 1938, p. 1; 24 October 1938, p. 3.

<sup>192</sup> Stevens to Lyons, 3 November 1938, EPP, folder 395.

<sup>193</sup> From *The News*, Adelaide, 3 November 1938, p. 1; also *The Riverine Herald*, 4 November 1938, p. 3. Page in his memoirs later described the creation of a Department of Supply and Development soon after in 1939 as "the one positive outcome" of this conference, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 324. But Ross describes this Department, which managed the procurement and manufacture of war equipment, as having been established on the initiative of the Department of Defence and remaining under its control; see Ross, *op. cit.*, pp. 209, 212.

“forthwith.” It warned that “the Commonwealth Government has determined that with the co-operation of the states, if it can get it, or without that co-operation, if it cannot, it will endeavour to make a national effort commensurate with our needs and resources.”<sup>194</sup> The incorrigible Page wrote to Giblin insisting that the timing for planned development was still “never better.” Although the government “seemed to be falling apart”, it was “ready to make a fresh start.”<sup>195</sup> Page also assured his departmental secretary that “I am quite sure that now we will really get a first class chance to secure co-ordination and planned development.”<sup>196</sup> He also kept pressing Lyons, who agreed to Cabinet reconsidering the whole idea. Page complained to the Prime Minister that a report by the Military Board on state co-operation was “uninspiring”, making it “obvious that the whole question of future industrial development and location of industries and their strategic value does not enter into their thoughts.”<sup>197</sup>

Preparation for the second bout with the Premiers was more thorough. On 25 October Cabinet finally approved a list of works for construction by the states.<sup>198</sup> Page directed Wilson to develop a new planning proposal. Wilson suggested a central co-ordinating committee of officials and industrialists to be called the Council of Industrial Development and Defence, headed by a Chief Executive Officer attached to the Prime Minister’s office and supported by specialist advisory committees. The Council would recommend projects to Commonwealth and state ministers, including when they met as the Loan Council. “Planless development”, warned Wilson, is “possibly national suicide”. He described this as so generous a proposal that “the Commonwealth government does not entertain the least doubt that the Premiers will find it acceptable.”<sup>199</sup> But when the Defence Minister provided Page with a revised list of priority works, he imparted a sense of the difficulties faced by adding that

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<sup>194</sup> EPP, folder 583 (untitled and undated, but refers to the conference with the Premiers as having been “on Friday”), p. 1.

<sup>195</sup> Page to Giblin, 28 November 1938, EPP, folder 407.

<sup>196</sup> Page to J.F. Murphy, 14 December 1938, Page papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 3, folder 25.

<sup>197</sup> Page to Lyons, 4 January 1939, EPP, folder 586.

<sup>198</sup> Cabinet minute of 25 October 1938, NAA, A2694, volume 19, part 1, Lyons and Page Ministries – Folders and Bundles of Minutes and Submissions, folio 71.

<sup>199</sup> ‘Industrial Development and Defence’, 1 November 1938, EPP, folder 1621; see also Hasluck, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

Tasmania and Western Australia were reluctant to make supplies available to the Defence Department on Sundays.<sup>200</sup>

Then Page reconsidered the implications of the October conference for his need to allay state suspicions. A committee of officials and industrialists would overwhelm the Loan Council with requests for ministerial guidance. Page and his departmental secretary now proposed that “the developmental and public works activity of Australia should be a ministerial body” – a National Council, supported by a fulltime Chief Industrial Adviser and an advisory committee of officials and experts.<sup>201</sup> Page was increasingly impatient. In a February 1939 memorandum to Cabinet he floated the idea of appointing an (unspecified) individual “with status and authority to get right on with the consideration of the problems”, thus “leaving the lines of co-operation with the states to be traced as opportunity offers.”<sup>202</sup>

The conference with the Premiers of 31 March 1939 was barely an advance on that of the previous October. It met in the shadow of Germany’s invasion of Czechoslovakia on 15 March and so Lyons opened with a warning to be ready for war. The National Council was still expected to extend well beyond defence needs to produce “an ordered programme of national development, both primary and secondary.” Lyons tried to pacify the states by stressing the inclusion of their ministers in the Council, but the Premiers were also told to rearrange their own expenditures to cover the revised public works schedule as the Commonwealth now faced too great a burden of defence responsibilities.<sup>203</sup> Although a National Council of the Prime Minister and the Premiers was at last endorsed, it was saddled with a debilitatingly obscure brief – “to consider matters of concern as occasion arises and to bring about all the necessary co-

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<sup>200</sup> Geoffrey Street to Page, 3 February 1939, EPP, folder 588.

<sup>201</sup> ‘Development and Defence’, undated but clearly subsequent to Wilson’s ‘Industrial Development and Defence’ proposal, EPP, folder 2121; see also Hasluck, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-2.

<sup>202</sup> ‘Memorandum for Cabinet – Co-ordination of Development and Defence’, 6 February 1939, EPP, folder 588. See also Page’s memo of 28 March 1939, in which he proposed “appointment of a special person as supremo on classification of public works”, NAA, A2694, volume 19, part 2, Lyons and Page Ministries – Folders and Bundles of Minutes and Submissions, folio 265.

<sup>203</sup> ‘Speech for Prime Minister, Premiers’ Conference, March 31<sup>st</sup>. 1939’, EPP, folder 583; also ‘Statement by the Minister for Defence’, EPP, folder 592, (specific date not given).

ordination of the related activities of the Commonwealth and the states.”<sup>204</sup>

The schedule of projects was consigned to discussion between Commonwealth and state officials.<sup>205</sup>

Even the Commonwealth doubted its own creation. The Secretary of the Department of Defence thought the National Council “should be confined to those problems which grow out of the Defence plans in relation to the national economic structure and primary and secondary industry”: otherwise it would constitute “an obvious duplication.” The Chairman of the Defence Committee warned that “the National Council must be divorced from all strategical considerations.” Essington Lewis simply declared the Council best left to politicians, not business.<sup>206</sup> Nor did the proposed public works progress well. The only concrete Commonwealth offer was extended in December 1938 to “co-operate with the states in works suitable for unemployment relief on the understanding that the state concerned would meet one fifth of costs and the works would have defence or civil aviation value.” Six months later the State Co-operation Liaison Officer in the Department of Defence reported that the only works of defence value actually undertaken were a few road construction and repair works.<sup>207</sup> In June 1939 the National Council met at the end of a Premiers’ Conference, for the second and last time. (There had been a brief inaugural meeting just after the March Premiers’ conference). Hasluck later concluded that since he could not find a record of discussions and participants could not recall any significant outcomes, it “could not have had any marked consequences.”<sup>208</sup> Australia’s best-placed attempt to institute national economic planning had already faded.

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<sup>204</sup> Hasluck, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

<sup>205</sup> ‘National Security – Co-operation with the States and Co-ordination of Commonwealth Activities’, 4 April 1938, EPP, folder 589. This memo, evidently prepared for Cabinet, added agreement to “close and continuous consultation concerning public works which are of value from the defence point of view” and to “confer concerning ways and means of developing new industries needed for defence and supply.”

<sup>206</sup> Frederick Shedden, ‘The National Council – its Functions in Their Relation to Defence’, 5 April 1939; Vice Admiral Colvin to Shedden, ‘Functions of National Council – Minute by Chairman, Defence Committee’, 6 April 1939; Essington Lewis to Shedden 12 April 1939; all EPP, folder 588, part 2.

<sup>207</sup> Hasluck, *op. cit.*, pp. 132, 135.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136. The press produced accounts of the Council’s inaugural meeting, such as the *Argus*, 3 April 1939, p. 8, and the *Age*, 3 April 1939, p. 12.

The National Council episode is consistent with the assessment by some historians that the later 1930s in Australia was a time of pessimism and absence of policy innovation.<sup>209</sup> Far from economic recovery opening the way for a resurgence of developmentalism, few policy-makers saw a need for radical change. Planning served no particular sectoral interest: apart from Page, support was limited to some economists and intellectuals. Page stood out as a developmentalist visionary in a relatively unambitious government focused on austerity-led recovery, but could not spark a renewed Bruce-Page style commitment to development. The Depression era had so deadened the Australian sense of possibilities that its main additions to the nation's political imagination were some avowedly anti-political movements.

The National Council also recalls Bruce's comment that one of his tasks as Prime Minister was to restrain the many enthusiasms of Earle Page. Page unfettered was indeed prone to sudden bold moves when he spied an opportunity, instead of the slow process of building support by demonstrating his ideas would work. Even as he rode high politically in the late 1930s, defence concerns and support from figures of the standing of Wilson and Giblin gave Page a starting point only. He had few close political confidants and did not habitually work with his political colleagues as policy equals. As the sense of economic urgency faded, Page's appeals to idealism attracted only already committed developmentalist thinkers like Stevens and Casey. (It is perhaps significant that Casey trained as an engineer and had worked in mining and manufacturing). Nor was the federal system as malleable as Page had hoped: state mistrust of the Commonwealth, and of Page himself, was strong.

The overall implication is that Page's power, although deep, was narrow. It encompassed only a federal Cabinet in which he headed the junior coalition party under a Prime Minister so ill that he complied with a proposal he does not appear to have fully understood. Page was much stronger in Lyons's Cabinet than in the business world or even the wider Country Party. It highlights also

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<sup>209</sup> See for example J.R. Robertson, '1930-39' in Crowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 434-5, 448. But the Canberra-based *Australian National Review* did at least editorialize in favour of national planning and Page's ideas in its April 1939 issue, pp. 2-4.

how he had drifted from the Country Party: few party colleagues supported his National Council and some, notably Dunstan, were openly hostile.

The end result was that he overstretched himself badly. A telling indicator of his self-perception as a rationalist, not the emotive dreamer he really was, is that he rarely fully considered the practical implementation of ideas such as planning. Planning was to Page self-evidently logical and thus assuredly workable. He was ultimately defeated by the difficulty of embedding comprehensive planning in a federal system, by sceptical political colleagues and the indifference of private industry. Yet Page never forgot his 1938-39 planning proposal. As early as a December 1940 speech on the war effort he again called for “a National Council of all the governments of Australia” that used “the best brains of the community with all the necessary powers to deal with both defence and developmental problems.”<sup>210</sup> National economic planning is an important part of Page’s vision, but did not give rise to a lasting personal legacy.

### **Page’s personal political crisis, 1939**

As a major failure in full view of his political peers, the National Council episode probably contributed to the decline in Page’s policy influence. He remained a formidable advocate, well capable in the years that followed of pushing his ideas (including planning) into national political debate. But from the late 1930s onwards, Page was never again entrusted with a major leadership role in development policy. Political colleagues largely lost faith in his grand visions and sense of the special status of the leader. This is important context for the following chapters on Page in the post-war era.

Page’s loss of the Country Party leadership in September 1939 is usually attributed to the events of his caretaker Prime Ministership five months earlier, primarily his infamous attempt to block the ascension of Robert Menzies. But Page’s fall from the leadership had been brewing for some years. Press

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<sup>210</sup> Untitled speech, 16 December 1940, EPP, folder 591.

reports appeared as early as 1932 of Country Party MPs being open to a change of leadership in favour of Thomas Paterson so as to clear the way for the formation of a coalition with the UAP. Reportedly, Page was saved by the unacceptability of the terms that Lyons offered.<sup>211</sup> John McEwen later said that when he entered federal parliament in 1934, “Page had already lost the support of a good section – not the majority, but a pretty important section – of his party.” He said that for all Page’s industry and imagination, he “was determined to do what he wanted to do” and “did not, except in a most passing way, consult his party members.”<sup>212</sup> Others have attested to a personal antipathy between Page and McEwen. This was partly the consequence of Page having campaigned against McEwen in the seat of Echuca in 1934 in favour of independent Country Party candidates, but also had much to do with very different respective backgrounds and policy priorities.<sup>213</sup>

In the wake of Lyons’s death on 7 April 1939, the parliamentary Country Party passed a resolution that it was not prepared to remain in a coalition should Menzies accede to the Prime Ministership. This was partly as Menzies – comparatively young, determined and inclined to arrogance – insisted on choosing all ministers himself, including those from the Country Party. There is no firm evidence that Page sought to extend his brief caretaker Prime Ministership, despite reported encouragement from Opposition Leader Curtin.<sup>214</sup> On the contrary, Page approached Bruce to return from London to resume the Prime Ministership, even offering up his own seat of Cowper as a base. Bruce effectively refused by stipulating that he would only do so should

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<sup>211</sup> Such reports are quoted in *The Life and Times of Thomas Paterson (1882-1952): A Biography and History by his Elder Son George Paterson*, privately published, Caulfield East, 1987, p. 42. Fred Alexander refers on unspecified grounds to Page by the mid-1930s “having no longer commanded the undivided support of the Country Party MPs.”; see *From Curtin to Menzies and After: Continuity or Confrontation?*, Thomas Nelson (Australia), Melbourne, 1973, p. 3.

<sup>212</sup> McEwen, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>213</sup> See Davey, *Ninety Not Out*, *op. cit.*, pp. 19, 55 and 61. Ian Robinson, much later Country Party MP for the eponymous seat of Page (and who admired Page as “an incredible man”), is quoted by Davey as saying that this mutual disdain was “so great that I don’t think it could ever be properly or fully described.” This may be an overstatement – Robinson himself added that such antipathy did not harm the Country Party, so evidently they were still able to work together.

<sup>214</sup> Page claimed that at Lyons’s funeral Curtin offered to support his continuation as Prime Minister until the next federal election, due in eighteen months; see *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 310.

he be able to serve as Prime Minister without belonging to any political party, which Page took to mean at the head of an all-party national government. Page strongly supported the idea of such a government, but Menzies did not. More personally, Page also disdained Menzies for the pressure he placed on the ailing Lyons by his March 1939 resignation from the ministry and deputy leadership of the UAP over the shelving of national insurance (a decision the Country Party supported).<sup>215</sup>

The collapse of relations between Page and Menzies culminated in the incident for which Page became notorious in later decades, his parliamentary attack of 20 April 1939 on Menzies' failure to join the first AIF:

When, 24 years ago, Australia was in the midst of the Gallipoli campaign, Mr Menzies was a member of the Australian Military Forces, and held the King's Commission. In 1915, after being in the service for some years, he resigned his commission and did not go overseas. I am not questioning the reasons why anyone did not go to the war. All I say is that if the right honourable gentleman cannot satisfactorily and publicly explain to a very great body of people in Australia who did participate in the war his failure to do so, he will not be able to get that maximum effort out of the people in the event of war.<sup>216</sup>

Page had raised the great unmentionable of who had and had not volunteered for active service in the Great War. Newspapers across the country reported that Page's comments "staggered members of all parties" and had MPs "interjecting in defence of Mr Menzies." The *Sydney Morning Herald* called it "a despicable attack."<sup>217</sup> Menzies himself pointed to a binding family decision that he would stay in Australia and two of his brothers would enlist.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Enid Lyons is reported to have attested to Page's anger being related to this perception; see Cameron Hazlehurst, 'Young Menzies', in Hazlehurst, *op. cit.*, pp. 11, 25.

<sup>216</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 April 1939, pp. 11-2. The text in this press report is identical to that in the *Argus* but slightly different from the text provided in Hansard, and incorporates many more interjections.

<sup>217</sup> See for example the *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin*, 21 April 1939, p. 9; the *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial is from 21 April 1939, p. 10.

<sup>218</sup> Martin, volume 1, *op. cit.*, pp. 275-6. Despite reluctance to mention this in public, some parliamentarians such as T.W. White remained privately resentful of Menzies for not having volunteered; see Martin, *ibid.*, pp. 124, 232.



Figure 7: 'The Blotted Page', (Argus, 21 April 1939, p. 10).

Was the failure of the National Council a further factor in this hostility to Menzies? Page was conscious of a paucity of support from his federal colleagues, and in *Truant Surgeon* made particular mention of Menzies' aloofness from proceedings during the first conference with the Premiers.<sup>219</sup> Witnessing Page assume effective leadership of the government may well have been a last straw for Menzies' confidence in Lyons. Menzies' 24 October 1938 speech to the Sydney Constitutional Club on the need for national leadership that was widely interpreted (including by Enid Lyons) as a public attack on the Prime Minister was delivered just three days after this conference.<sup>220</sup> Public and parliamentary condemnation of Page's atypically personal attack became the immediate trigger for his loss of the party leadership. Anger was heightened by Page having earlier given party colleagues the impression that he would accede to their pleas to moderate his comments.<sup>221</sup> He was undeterred by references to the relative brevity of his own war service. (One of

<sup>219</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 302-3.

<sup>220</sup> The fullest account of this speech is at Martin, vol. 1, *op. cit.*, pp. 241-4. This touches on the context of the speech being preceded by an unhappy meeting with the Premiers, but does not draw out Page's role in this. Menzies consistently denied that the speech was aimed at Lyons.

<sup>221</sup> Paterson, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-6.

the interjections on 20 April was “How many Germans did you kill, Doc?”<sup>222</sup> Four Country Party MPs, including Arthur Fadden, at once sat as independent Country Party members. Fadden had endured his own personal attacks for not enlisting in the First AIF.<sup>223</sup> The coalition with the UAP was suspended. Page’s standing in the party was weakened by this incident, but he remained leader (perhaps helped by the absence of the four). He only eventually resigned his compromised leadership on 13 September 1939 to help clear the way for a wartime Country Party-UAP coalition, Menzies having indicated that although he was open to having Country Party ministers in his Cabinet this could not include Page himself.

The Country Party elected the South Australian Archie Cameron as its new leader and re-joined the coalition in March 1940 after the UAP government had been shaken by an unexpected by-election loss. In late October Page, now nominally reconciled with the Prime Minister, returned to Cabinet as Minister for Commerce. Page professed to have become a Menzies admirer after having seen him perform as a wartime leader, defending him from personal attacks following his return from an extended overseas trip in May 1941 and even proffering medical advice that the Prime Minister should rest.<sup>224</sup> Yet Menzies never fully trusted Page and singled him out in his memoirs for what he recalled as “a bitter and entirely false attack upon me.”<sup>225</sup>

It is significant that Page did not produce a fully like-minded successor as party leader to take up his policy vision. After the temperamental Cameron resigned in October 1940, Page and McEwen were deadlocked in a party room ballot to succeed him. The leadership went instead went to Fadden as a compromise candidate, now back in the Country Party fold. This was supposedly a stop-gap measure but in fact frustrated McEwen’s leadership ambitions until Fadden’s retirement in 1958.<sup>226</sup> Fadden was a less divisive party leader than

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<sup>222</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 April 1939, p. 12.

<sup>223</sup> Tracey Arklay, *Arthur Fadden: A Political Silhouette*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, North Melbourne, 2014, p. 43.

<sup>224</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 340-2.

<sup>225</sup> R.G. Menzies, *Afternoon Light: Some Memories of Men and Events*, Cassell, Melbourne, 1967, p. 13.

<sup>226</sup> Davey, *Ninety Not Out*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

Page and far more conventional in outlook. Paul Hasluck in his capacity as both historian and colleague described him as an “affable, astute, story-telling man, untroubled by the deeper significance of problems.”<sup>227</sup> Fadden was far more malleable on policy than Page, and during the war years and in the post-war lead-up to the second Menzies government was drawn to conventional policies on rural development. These helped consolidate the shift of the Country Party away from Page’s vision of the nation.

Page could look back on the 1930s as his most mixed decade. His political fortunes fell, rose and then suddenly fell again at decade’s end. Despite the closeness of their working relationship, Lyons had not provided the balance of opportunity and firm guidance that Bruce had. His austere priority of recovery from the Depression offered Page only limited basis for policy initiatives until he asserted himself on planning in 1938-39. Undeterred, Page adapted only his strategies to the greatly changed environment of the Depression, not his fundamental aims. Regionalism and decentralisation remained his ultimate goals, with co-operative federalism and planning as means to these grand ends. Pragmatic opportunism became increasingly unavoidable as he had to be alert to limited opportunities. Page’s own use of experts such as Wilson and Giblin late in the decade unwittingly marked a step towards the consolidation of the role of economists in government.

Yet Page still made important contributions to Australian political discourse in these years. He was the main bridge for developmentalist ideas into politics as he tried to harness such energetic business leaders as Gepp and Lewis, and established relationships with a select number of more abstract thinkers such as Bland. By seizing upon a succession of infrequent chances to implement dearly-held ideas that now sat well outside the policy mainstream, he managed to promote most major elements of the vision he set out in 1917, albeit with very differing results. Although Page played leading roles in inserting regionalism and planning onto the political agenda, his most substantive

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<sup>227</sup> Hasluck, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

achievement of the 1930s was the Australian Agricultural Council, a lasting landmark in co-operative federalism.

## **CHAPTER 7 – POST-WAR PAGE: HOPES AMIDST FRUSTRATIONS**

The domestic political outcomes of World War Two should in some ways have suited Page. The war fostered a planning-orientated culture that “gave life to the argument promoted by inter-war new liberals that expert knowledge should determine resource allocation and social order.”<sup>1</sup> It also accelerated the centralisation of governmental power, foremostly with the transfer of state income taxes to the Commonwealth. H.C. Coombs, Director-General of Post-War Reconstruction, wrote in 1944 of the “opportunity to move consciously and intelligently towards a new economic and social system,” entirely unlike that of the Depression years.<sup>2</sup>

During the war, political attention began to return to developmentalism, making it central to post-war reconstruction. Many of the ideas for which Page had been the pre-eminent national advocate for over two decades finally entered the political mainstream such as regionalism, decentralisation and major infrastructure, including hydroelectricity. His wartime service in London and participation in the 1942 Constitutional Convention heightened his sense of entitlement to a major say in the policy priorities of the forthcoming post-war era, reinforced by a conviction that wartime had made his policy prescriptions more acceptable to the general public.

But the changed political and policy-making precepts of this intellectually exciting period posed major new challenges for Page, and provide a sharp contrast to his political peak of the inter-war years. Much post-war policy thinking had troubling implications in such favoured fields of his as co-operative federalism. The economy was developing in directions that he found worrying: although post-war farm export prices were high, mechanisation reduced rural employment and the wartime boost to manufacturing combined with a housing backlog pushed public spending towards the cities.<sup>3</sup> Above all, Page faced the paradox of his favoured policy themes at last being elevated to the centre of

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<sup>1</sup> Walter, *What Were They Thinking?*, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Stuart Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment: War and Reconstruction in the 1940s*, NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, 2015, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Bolton, '1939-51' in Crowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 486-90.

national policy amidst a new technocratic and expert-oriented environment that he found unfamiliar and sometimes hostile. He responded to exclusion from official processes and dwindling personal power within his own party by increasingly trying to influence policy agendas through lobbying governments and the media. His championing of the Clarence in preference to the Snowy Mountains Scheme provides a study of how he found himself operating in such unexpected and unpropitious circumstances.

### **Page's post-war expectations: the wartime setting**

Page foresaw the looming post-war era as a rare opportunity. He attached great importance to ensuring that full advantage was taken of public tolerance of wartime measures as a basis for developmentalist initiatives. Despite being out of ministerial office from October 1941, the war years presented Page with two unexpected opportunities to pursue major elements of his policy agenda. These raised his expectations, but someone more self-aware might have seen them as signs of the difficulties he would face in trying to work with a post-war Labor government.

The first opportunity was provided by the short-lived government of Arthur Fadden, who was elevated to the prime ministership late in August 1941 following the resignation of the embattled Robert Menzies. The following month, Page was appointed Australian minister resident in London, the outcome of four months of debate about Australian representation in the British War Cabinet. Menzies had proposed representation at prime ministerial level, but his own Cabinet preferred a minister of less exalted rank. The Fadden government was defeated on the floor of the House while Page was en route, but its Labor successor led by John Curtin declined his offer to return. This was ultimately to prove unfortunate for Page. It is evident from the detailed diary that he kept of this wartime service that Churchill initially gave him a considerable amount of his time.<sup>4</sup> By December Page had secured a position

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<sup>4</sup> The diary is preserved in typed form at EPP, folder 2787 (iii). It provides a continuous narrative from Page's departure from Australia in September 1941 to his August 1942 return, with extra entries concerning a discussion with Douglas MacArthur on 26 October 1942, the

on British War Cabinet committees and in early 1942 he helped to establish the Pacific War Council, intended to advise on Allied operations in the Pacific theatre. But Japan's entry into the war dramatically increased tensions between London and Canberra over the defence of Singapore and the sudden transformation of the United States into a full combatant greatly diminished Australia's relative importance as a British ally.

Page's personal standing with the Curtin government was seriously damaged in February 1942 when he misinterpreted its instructions and gave Churchill the impression that Australia was agreeable to the diversion to Burma of the 7th Australian Division, then at sea returning from the Middle East. Curtin and Evatt, the External Affairs Minister, rebuked Page in an angry exchange conducted by cable. Page (along with Stanley Bruce as High Commissioner) also bore the brunt of Churchill's ire over strategy for Singapore.<sup>5</sup> These tensions placed Page under great stress. He later told Curtin that "I went through since January the worst period of acute mental distress of my whole life."<sup>6</sup> A near-fatal bout of pneumonia prompted his departure from London in June 1942. Page remained defensive about his London experience, claiming to have helped contain the damage to bilateral relations.<sup>7</sup> This episode has been much-publicised and his conduct frequently criticised: along with the April 1939 attack on Menzies, it has distorted wider impressions of Page. The harm to his relations with the Labor government almost certainly had implications for his hopes of a direct role in post-war reconstruction.

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Constitutional Convention of November-December 1942 and a War Council meeting of 8 December 1942.

<sup>5</sup> Page's long diary entry on the War Cabinet meeting of 26 January 1942 records that "Ch. then went off the deep end about the Austns. generally"; EPP, folder 2787 (iii). The relevant cables between Page and Canberra are also at EPP, folder 2788 (ii). For a fuller account of this episode concerning the return of Australian troops see David Horner, *Inside the War Cabinet: Directing Australia's War Effort 1939-45*, Allen & Unwin in association with the Australian Archives, St Leonards, 1996, pp. 97-108.

<sup>6</sup> Page to Curtin, April 1942, quoted in Page's *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Page later produced a curious (and undated) short typed statement reflecting on his personal role in the Singapore crisis. He wrote of persuading Churchill and Curtin to moderate their dispute, of Churchill agreeing that Page could vet all his future cables to the Australians, and of the King personally honouring him for these efforts by making him a Companion of Honour. See EPP, folder 2577; Page refers to this very briefly also in *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 419.

Page in London was an inexperienced and unconventional diplomat who remained incorrigibly alert to opportunities to pursue his own agenda. Although he considered himself an economic and social innovator, his continuing attachment to the possibilities of the Imperial connection attracted criticism at a time of rising bilateral tension between Britain and Australia over divergent strategic and economic interests.<sup>8</sup> He had long seen the Empire not just as a vehicle for Australian trade policy but also for the management of international trade, including “Empire rationalisation.” In May 1936, for example, he had drafted an article for the *Farmers Weekly* proposing to organise Australia’s trade in primary products via producer-controlled but government-backed national boards that would work with Empire Boards for each product. Together, these would set production amounts, influence prices and manage imports from outside the Empire.<sup>9</sup> Use of the Empire to manage international trade had numerous other eminent pre-war advocates such as Lionel Curtis, the Anglo-Canadian media baron Lord Beaverbrook, and the London-based Australian historian W.K. Hancock.<sup>10</sup> But the policy and political opportunities of the 1930s were in many respects very different from those of the 1940s.

In wartime, Page’s vision went much further to propose harnessing the Empire to manage the post-war production and pricing of major traded commodities and of manufactures such as steel. He seems to have been thinking of extending wartime supply arrangements into peacetime as the starting point for a process that would eventually reinvigorate the entire Empire. Page used his wartime travels to promote this extraordinarily ambitious but ill-defined vision with an assortment of well-placed figures, including British civil servants, New

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<sup>8</sup> These tensions arose from such issues as conservation of foreign exchange, expansion of Australian manufacturing at the expense of British exports and, prior to December 1941, whether to deter or seek compromise with Japan: see Kosmas Tsokhas, ‘Dedominionization: The Anglo-Australian Experience, 1939-1945’, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 37, no. 4, December 1994, pp. 861-83.

<sup>9</sup> See EPP, folder 1802. The Australian government’s perspective on international discussions concerning institutional arrangements for management of the post-war world economy is outlined by Macintyre in *Australia’s Boldest Experiment*, *op. cit.*, pp. 241-53. Its foremost interest was in the implications for full employment. Although these international discussions did include trade in primary products, notably at the May 1943 Hot Springs Conference in the United States, their overall emphasis was on free trade and international financial stability rather than Page’s proposed production and price controls.

<sup>10</sup> See for example a summary of Hancock’s views on the Empire in Jim Davidson, *A Three-Cornered Life: The Historian W.K. Hancock*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2010, pp.183, 200-3. Page’s wartime diary refers to meeting Curtis, 15 January 1942, *op. cit.*

York financiers and Oxford dons. In London in January 1942 he spoke publicly of how “the methods of co-ordination that are adopted for wartime action should be such as can be used for peacetime purposes and post-war planning”, and “not just vanish into thin air as they did after the last war.”<sup>11</sup> Soon after, as Singapore was about to fall to the Japanese, he spoke at All Souls College, Oxford, on the co-ordination of wartime supplies and the “rationalisation of industry” between the Empire and other allied countries through “continuous and permanent machinery I have outlined for England & Australia.” Such machinery would at war’s end “overcome fierce competition that will bring trade dislocation and depressions.”<sup>12</sup> Just before his departure for home, he told the British Minister of Labour, Ernest Bevin, of his hopes for a Commonwealth Council of Agriculture that would emulate the work of the Empire Marketing Board of 1926-33 in the orderly marketing of agricultural goods.<sup>13</sup> In Washington, en route back to Australia, he prepared a press statement adding that “pool controls” set up by Allied governments jointly to control production should be used after the war to “automatically plan to meet the problems of peace”, with “international collaboration proceeding item by item.”<sup>14</sup> There were signs here, perhaps, of the reasons for Field Marshal Alan Brooke’s exasperated (and essentially unfair) comment that Page had in the War Cabinet displayed “the mentality of a greengrocer.”<sup>15</sup>

The emphasis on global rationalisation, organisation and planning makes all this less a typical Australian conception of Empire than a distinctively Page view, incorporating old reciprocal understandings that scarcely recognised the likely dynamics of post-war agreements. He even speculated about a link to the possible return of the United States to the Imperial fold. He wrote in his diary of sending plans to Curtin, “the symmetry of which was perfect and which

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Speech by Sir Earle Page at Second Wednesday Club, London, 7th January 1942’, EPP, folder 1902 (2).

<sup>12</sup> See EPP, folder 1819, for a summary outline of this 31 January 1942 speech; also his wartime diary entries for 31 January-1 February 1942, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Page’s wartime diary, *op.cit.*, entry for 25 June 1942.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Statement by Sir Earle Page at Press Conference at Washington D.C. July 10th, 1942’, EPP, folder 1902 (2).

<sup>15</sup> Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, *War Diaries 1939-1945*, edited by Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 2001, p. 212. Brooke was then Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

would provide an insoluble bond of unity between Empire for good.” Page was also preparing a statement on production and supply on an Empire basis, but feared “that they may be so stupid as not to be able to understand without the actual practical operation of the system that I have had, how indispensable this system is and how permanent and indissoluble it will make the union.”<sup>16</sup> This all came to little, having far exceeded Page’s personal influence and being contrary to the reality of a British Empire facing decline as the United States assumed leadership of the post-war world. There is no more striking instance of the extent of Page’s policy ambitions and willingness to pursue these whenever an opportunity presented itself.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 8: Earle Page with Ethel Page on his return to Australia, August 1942. (Australian War Memorial, 150400).

When Page returned to Australia in August 1942, he was greeted personally by Prime Minister Curtin shortly after his arrival. He resumed his place in a parliamentary Country Party still led by Arthur Fadden. Page remained undeterred by his decidedly mixed experiences overseas and at once sought a major say in guiding post-war reconstruction. He reported to parliament that in London he had been “intimately associated” with “the system of inter-

<sup>16</sup> Page’s wartime diary, *op.cit.*, entry for 28 January 1942. An annex to the diary, ‘Note of Discussion at Balliol College, 31.1.42’, touches on a federal union involving the Empire and the United States. Other relevant diary entries include those for 29 January 1942 and 24 June 1942.

<sup>17</sup> Page retained faith in the potential of the Empire, writing in his memoirs that if it had “developed the same common feeling as the United States,” then it would have become a great zone for trade and development, a “Commonwealth market” that the rest of world would have wished to join; see *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, pp. 440-1.

governmental contacts” and was even “largely instrumental in creating the Empire machinery associated with it” (a reference to the Commonwealth Supply Council and other means of Allied collaboration on wartime supplies, especially food). On this basis, Page considered that he “could be of use not only in the consideration of current problems, but also in planning for the post-war period, so that Australia shall be able to take its proper place in the affairs of the world.”<sup>18</sup> Although Page overstated his influence in London, he was nonetheless one of the few Australians to have operated at high levels in Allied capitals, and had a longstanding claim to expertise in prospective post-war issues of regionalism, planning and infrastructure.

Page’s second big wartime opportunity came when the Curtin government appointed him a delegate to the Constitutional Convention held in Canberra late in 1942. The government was already looking towards realising its anticipated post-war reconstruction programme and gave Evatt (also Attorney-General) the task of securing the greater constitutional powers this required. Page still had a good personal relationship with Curtin, but the appointment had more to do with the need for a balanced party representation at the convention than any intended signal of a substantive role in post-war reconstruction.<sup>19</sup> Yet it both raised his hopes and came to demonstrate the extent to which his views had drifted from those of his political peers.

The convention arose from a bill introduced into parliament in early October 1941 proposing an entirely new section of the Constitution expanding the Commonwealth’s powers over industry, employment, health, transport and housing, while debarring the High Court from interfering with legislation considered necessary for “economic security and social justice.”<sup>20</sup> Faced with the unlikelihood of such radical alterations getting past the Senate let alone succeeding at a referendum, the Curtin government resorted to convening a special Constitutional Convention of Commonwealth and state parliamentarians

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<sup>18</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 9 September 1942, p. 109. Page devoted all of chapter 19 of his memoirs to international arrangements for wartime production and supply, including his fear that these could weaken Australia’s ties with Britain.

<sup>19</sup> Page’s short (one and a half page) ‘Diary of Constitutional Convention’, notes simply that “I was chosen to represent the Country Party”; EPP, folder 2787 (iii).

<sup>20</sup> Macintyre, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-8.

from all parties in the hope of securing broad-based political support. Membership was accordingly wide – eight members of the House of Representatives, four of the Senate, and the Premier and the Opposition leader from each state, adding up to a total of twenty-four delegates evenly divided between the ALP and the non-Labor parties.<sup>21</sup>

Delegates convened in Parliament House Canberra from 24 November to 4 December 1942. Proceedings soon made it clear that a referendum on greater Commonwealth powers lacked bipartisan support. Fadden, then also Leader of the Opposition, accused the Curtin government of trying to insert the Labor Party's platform into the Constitution.<sup>22</sup> But Page by way of contrast treated the convention as an opportunity to present an ambitious and original policy plan. His main concerns were that the government had both misjudged its strategy and was missing an opportunity to achieve major reform.

Unlike other non-Labor delegates, Page was not overly concerned by the dangers of a powerful central government. Instead, he proposed that for development projects “the Commonwealth should plan and finance and...the states should administer and construct through their own agencies or through that of their local governments,” making them “the hands and fingers of the planning body.” He evoked past co-operative successes such as tied road grants, the Sydney-Brisbane railway and the Hume Dam on the Murray. If “the states could have some voice in the arrangement of the plan and of the general lines of policy, then there could be little objection to ample legal powers being in the hands of the Commonwealth.”<sup>23</sup> A National Council of the Commonwealth and the states should be appointed with a permanent secretariat “to see what powers could be best handled co-operatively, which could be best handled by the Commonwealth or by states, and also should look

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<sup>21</sup> The extended proceedings that followed were dubbed a Constitutional Convention, but Paul Hasluck, writing later as an official war historian, severely doubted that they deserved such an elevated title. See Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1942-1945*, a volume in the official history of Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 4 Civil, volume 2, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1970, pp. 524-8.

<sup>22</sup> Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Sir Earle Page – Constitutional Convention, Canberra, 1/12/42’, EPP, folder 888.

at the changes necessary if any drastic reform of the Constitution in the direction of unification were found to be indispensable.”<sup>24</sup>

Page was clearly seeking acceptance as a major contributor to post-war reconstruction. He was undeterred by the partisanship on display during and after the Convention, instead indicating his readiness to work across party lines. Although the Convention concluded with delegates unanimously supporting the states using section 51 (xxxvii) of the Constitution to voluntarily refer powers to the Commonwealth on a strictly temporary basis, in the event only two Labor states, New South Wales and Queensland, passed the requisite legislation. This resulted in a referendum in August 1944 for the direct acquisition of powers by the Commonwealth for a five year period after the cessation of hostilities, including over the production and distribution of goods. (In parliament, the Country Party initially voted with the government on the referendum legislation but later switched after failing to secure an amendment to strengthen powers over the marketing of commodities).<sup>25</sup>

Page’s hopes and fears for post-war reconstruction were as much about means as ends, making him one of the first major public figures to articulate a comprehensive co-operative path to constitutional change. He had long experience of failed referendums thwarting constitutional reform, and saw the nation’s wartime exigencies as presenting a chance to alter this pattern. In the parliamentary debate of March 1944 on the forthcoming referendum, he said that experience had convinced him that major reforms “cannot be rammed down the throats of the states by a referendum”, and wryly recalled that the only major referendum carried since Federation was the 1928 enshrinement of the Financial Agreement.<sup>26</sup> Although he thought that the states accepted much of what the Constitutional Convention and 1944 referendum proposed, Page saw the Commonwealth as courting failure by also seeking certain more controversial wider powers, such as over prices and company legislation. He

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<sup>24</sup> ‘Diary of Constitutional Convention’, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Hasluck, vol. 2, *op. cit.*, pp. 534-5; Macintyre, *Australia’s Boldest Experiment*, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

<sup>26</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 8 March 1944, p. 1072. Up to March 1944, Australian governments had conducted referendums on eighteen constitutional amendments for only three successes.

simultaneously delineated the gap between his wider vision and the more immediate aims of the Curtin government by declaring that in other respects the proposed referendum was flawed by seeking merely “partial and inadequate powers”, particularly by omitting Commonwealth control of primary production and failing “to acquire the whole of the railways of Australia.” If Australia were to compete successfully with countries like the Soviet Union, the United States and Canada, said Page, it must exercise secure proper national control of communications and energy.<sup>27</sup>

From the mid-1920s onwards, Page had increasingly found that in order to advance his developmentalist ideas, he needed to make accommodations with a constitution and a federal system that he otherwise disdained. As a patient and principled opportunist, Page was encouraged, even excited, by how wartime provided a unique chance to put this approach into practice. The most promising way forward in 1944, he said, was actually “the co-operative method, exemplified by the Loan Council.”<sup>28</sup> The war had familiarized the states and the Australian public with the exercise of central power over railways, agriculture, marketing and energy, creating the conditions needed for a voluntary temporary transfer of selected responsibilities to the Commonwealth by reasoned, patriotic appeals to inter-governmental co-operation. He proposed that instead of a referendum, the Commonwealth should convene a special conference with the states to effect this transfer, to be followed only much later by a referendum to make the changes permanent.<sup>29</sup> Page turned out to be essentially right in his fears about strategy: the referendum of August 1944 succeeded in only two states, an early signal that the public was tiring of wartime controls. This major failure forced the Curtin and Chifley governments to turn to reliance on co-operation from the states, a major constraint on their post-war reconstruction program.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1071, 1077.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1072.

<sup>29</sup> Speech to Convention by Page, 30 November 1942, EPP, folder 886.

<sup>30</sup> Stuart Macintyre, ‘The Post-War Reconstruction Project’, in Samuel Furphy (ed.), *The Seven Dwarfs and the Age of the Mandarins: Australian Government Administration in the Post-War Reconstruction Era*, ANU Press, Canberra, 2015, p. 36.

### **Page falters in the post-war environment**

In the environment of wartime, there developed within the Commonwealth government a confidence that post-war reconstruction would be a unique opportunity to build a fairer, more prosperous nation. Coombs much later reflected that “we had faith in the intellectual model of the economic system and our capacity to manage it; we believed that it could in practice deliver benefits to both producer and consumer; we had the ear and the confidence of a Prime Minister and a Treasurer who combined vision with executive competence; we were conscious that there was in the community generally a conviction that a better world could be built.”<sup>31</sup> To this end, Curtin, Chifley and their intellectual supporters hoped that public acceptance of planning and direction as wartime necessities would carry over into a post-war tolerance of economic controls. This official optimism – perhaps more inspired hope – in practice ran up against the growing public weariness with government regulation that had defeated the 1944 referendum.<sup>32</sup> Considering his own taste for planning, Page should have prospered amidst such optimism, but soon encountered the consequences of shifts in party politics and policy-making.

Page’s vision of national development was outwardly compatible with the government’s main strategies for post-war reconstruction of regionalism, infrastructure projects, communality and expert-led national policy planning. New planning-orientated agencies and inquiries had begun to appear early during the war. In June 1940, under the Menzies government, the Loan Council agreed to appoint a Co-ordinator-General of Public Works to assess the economic and military significance of works proposed by state governments.<sup>33</sup> The Curtin government went further by proposing both a powerful National Works Commission to evaluate all new major construction projects and a reserve programme of projects to be deployed if needed to

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<sup>31</sup> H.C. Coombs, *Trial Balance: Issues of My Working Life*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1981, p. 27.

<sup>32</sup> Macintyre, *Australia’s Boldest Experiment*, *op. cit.*, pp. 5, 12, 14, 193.

<sup>33</sup> Heather Curtis, ‘Planning for National Development’, *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1954, p. 55. This office lost influence with the return to peace-time conditions.

cushion the employment consequences of demobilisation.<sup>34</sup> The Commission idea fell foul of resistance from the states, but a National Works Council was established in 1943 as an adjunct to the Premiers' Conference to "promote development of national resources according to a long-term programme" and make recommendations to the Loan Council on proposals submitted by the states.<sup>35</sup> The Commonwealth Housing Commission, also formed in 1943, described planning as "a conscious effort to guide the development of the resources of the nation" and proposed a Commonwealth Planning Authority to bring together all agencies dealing with public works, industry and housing.<sup>36</sup>

Post-war reconstruction's similarity to Page's vision needs to be qualified in one important respect. Despite the strong economic growth of the war years – real GDP rose by 26 per cent between 1939 and 1946 – much of the Labor government's planning for peacetime was motivated by an overarching fear of large scale unemployment reminiscent of the Great Depression.<sup>37</sup> David Rivett, chief executive officer of the CSIR, had for example warned in 1941 that "the only completely satisfactory method of dealing with unemployment devised by man seems to be war."<sup>38</sup> Developmentalist policy of this time was frequently presented as a means of avoiding the economic disaster of the previous decade, hence an early post-war emphasis on direct public investment in growth. The Chifley government's 1945 White Paper on Full Employment opened with the proclamation that "full employment is a fundamental aim of the Commonwealth government."<sup>39</sup> The crucially important concept of full employment rarely appears in Page's own pronouncements on national development.

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<sup>34</sup> Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

<sup>35</sup> Quote from the 1945 Commonwealth White Paper *Full Employment in Australia*, Australian Government Printer, Canberra, 1945; see A.J. Davies, 'National Development', *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 4, December 1965, p. 47. The National Works Council lapsed after the war. See also Coombs, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-7, and Macintyre, *ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>36</sup> Macintyre, *ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>37</sup> Yule in Connor, Stanley and Yule, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>39</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, White Paper *Full Employment in Australia*, *op. cit.* See also Alex Millmow, 'Australia and the Keynesian Revolution', in Furphy, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-2.

To his chagrin, Page was never given any formal role by the post-war Chifley government. His invitation to the 1942 Constitutional Convention and service on the Advisory War Council in 1942-43 and 1944-45 remained temporary aberrations attributable to the necessities of war and politics, and to recognition of the expertise he had gained in London.<sup>40</sup> Page did not even earn a mention in *Regional Development Magazine* produced by the Department of Post-War Reconstruction. He came to resent this exclusion from issues on which he felt past contributions gave him a rightful role transcending the party divide. There emerged a discernible bitterness in his speeches in which he goaded government figures with whom he had formerly worked well, including Chifley himself. But the government simply did not consider it needed Page's guidance.

Amid strident debates over whether post-war development should be led by government planning or private enterprise, Page, as so often, also diverged from his political peers. Harold Holt spoke in 1944 of the danger of "a regimented Australia, a drab grey world in which every human being is pushed around." Fellow Liberal Eric Spooner warned of "some outdated theology which tried to make people come to heel by the threat of hell fire."<sup>41</sup> Page did not place such stress on the rights of the individual and was less suspicious of extending government-led planning into peacetime. Herbert Gepp (Page's old DMC contact), Charles Kemp of the Institute of Public Affairs and most other business progressives of the time tended to be more assertively individualist, perhaps in reaction to the socialist associations of a Labor government. Despite newly acquired Keynesian sympathies, they tolerated government-led planning only to the extent that it was a public-private collaboration that allowed private enterprise freedom of action, such as the very selective use of public works.<sup>42</sup> Page agreed that private enterprise was critically important and fiercely opposed the Chifley government's bank nationalisation, but remained more comfortable with government playing a central role in planning regionalisation and electrification to harness the power of the private sector. At

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<sup>40</sup> Page's own account stresses the latter motivation; see *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, p. 420.

<sup>41</sup> Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment, op. cit.*, p. 261.

<sup>42</sup> Walter, *What Were They Thinking?, op. cit.*, pp. 189, 194-7.

a 1945 celebration of his twenty-five years in parliament, he spoke of how “the real challenge to Australian progress is fear and timidity in undertaking full tasks necessary to the fulfilment of our destiny”: evidence of faith in the nation’s future “lies in a big, constructive plan of development.”<sup>43</sup>

Nor did Page have a particularly strong personal standing amongst the intellectuals who proliferated in the post-war policy environment. James Walter writes of diverse new groups of applied thinkers that included economists, bankers, academics, theologians, unionists, public servants and others, and divides them into “bureaucratic reconstructionists” who favoured collective and state-directed action, and more technocratic business progressives.<sup>44</sup> Although Page’s ideas overlapped with those held by many of these thinkers, he did not fit neatly into either intellectual current. He retained a strong rural bias, and the National Council episode of a few years earlier showed that his interaction with more thoughtful business leaders did not guarantee support for his brand of developmentalism.

Page’s divergence from new post-war intellectual trends was a factor in his difficulty in coping with changes in the conduct of government, especially the role of the Commonwealth public service. The first post-1945 annual report of the Commonwealth Public Service Board recognised a wartime shift in the functions of government from “regulation” to more “positive and constructive responsibilities.”<sup>45</sup> Stuart Macintyre, the foremost historian of post-war reconstruction, sees the wartime increase in central direction as having required stronger economic and other policy skills in the federal bureaucracy, leading to “an influx of younger, university-trained officers drawn from the networks in which the schemes of social meliorism and rational improvement were nurtured.”<sup>46</sup> Stephen Alomes similarly notes that the war brought into government intellectual figures from business and the professions who were

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<sup>43</sup> Reported in the *Daily Examiner*, 1 November 1945, p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> Walter in Head and Walter, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 244-63.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Nicholas Brown, ‘The Seven Dwarfs: A Team of Rivals’, in Furphy, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>46</sup> Macintyre, *Australia’s Boldest Experiment*, *op. cit.*, p. 471. On the pre-war public service, see L.F. Crisp, ‘Politics and the Commonwealth Public Service’ in R.N. Spann and G.R. Curnow, *Public Policy and Administration in Australia: A Reader*, Wiley, Sydney, 1975, pp. 187-8.

associated with the Australian Institute of Political Science and the Australian Institute of International Affairs, but that in the post-war years they were largely surpassed by the rise of a more skilled public service, including a powerful Treasury Department.<sup>47</sup>

These changes resulted in a government with a very different way of analysing issues than Page's instinctive approach. Major departments now boasted an intelligentsia of economics-trained staff committed not only to Keynesian theory and a planning-orientated world view, but also the rigorous assessment of project proposals. Even before the war, outspoken young Australian academic economists were ahead of most of their international counterparts in taking a close interest in macroeconomic demand management.<sup>48</sup> The new post-war cohort of young economists had backgrounds quite unlike that of Page. Coombs himself had studied at the London School of Economics, and in post-war Canberra he built a powerful personal network of university-trained economists, bankers and policy-orientated public servants, including R.C. Mills, Douglas Copland, Leslie Melville, John Crawford, L.F. Giblin and Trevor Swan.<sup>49</sup>

Page had little empathy with this style of public service: he preferred advisors who validated his own predispositions. He supported a certain efficiency in resource allocation, as reflected in his cautious approach to tariffs, but repeatedly rejected discouraging findings about the likely returns on hydroelectric projects and doubts about the planned decentralisation of industry. Page favoured expenditure on public works but mainly to provide rural infrastructure and advance his vision of decentralisation. He was attracted only to those economists, such as Roland Wilson, with a strong interest in development and long-term growth. (Wilson was Commonwealth Statistician for most of this immediate post-war period, during which he continued to support planning but in a limited sense of co-ordinating the many

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<sup>47</sup> See Steven Alomes, 'Intellectuals and Publicists 1920s to 1940s' in Head and Walter, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-87.

<sup>48</sup> Millmow in Furphy, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>49</sup> Walter, *What Were They Thinking?*, *op. cit.*, pp. 181, 183-4.

forms of government policy intervention now in play).<sup>50</sup> Page remained driven by his deep emotional commitment to regionalism and decentralisation, rather than openness to new intellectual trends that placed these goals within inclusive social policies and over-arching economic management. His wartime diary details many meetings with important public figures in Britain but makes no mention of Keynes or his acolytes.

Changes in the conduct of government were also given an institutional basis by Australia being one of the few nations to draw together all the pressing policy challenges of these years – issues as diverse as demobilisation, conversion of munitions production, housing shortages, immigration, new social welfare and education – under the one label of post-war reconstruction.<sup>51</sup> The Department of Post-War Reconstruction was established in December 1942 to provide policy oversight, with Chifley as minister. It initially oversaw the planning of a more productive and equitable economy through an array of special expert commissions of inquiry, notably the Rural Reconstruction Commission, the Commonwealth Housing Commission and the Secondary Industries Commission. The Department was to guide and co-ordinate these investigations and then draw on their findings in formulating policy for implementation by line agencies. As these various planning and policy commissions progressively completed their work, they were replaced by divisions of the Department, including regional and rural divisions. This all made Post-War Reconstruction a small but powerfully placed agency, and the foremost target of Page's lobbying. (Coombs failed to establish instead an outright Department of Economic Planning).<sup>52</sup>

Page was frustrated but undeterred by his exclusion from a formal role in post-war reconstruction. As will be seen, he was still successful in pushing issues onto the Commonwealth government's agenda by his persistent lobbying. He also appealed to public and elite opinion through non-governmental forums and the media, and maintained an occasional presence amongst elements of the

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<sup>50</sup> Selwyn Cornish, 'Sir Roland Wilson – *Primus Inter Pares*', in Furphy, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-6.

<sup>51</sup> Macintyre, 'The Post-War Reconstruction Project', *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 46-7; Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

diverse milieu of post-war developmentalist thinkers. Page provided among the broadest of visions for the post-war nation by linking co-operative federalism, decentralisation, higher education, hydroelectricity, planning and regionalism, and by proposing emulation of the famed Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which had assumed “totemic significance” in the post-war world.<sup>53</sup>

Page’s attempt to engage with the open policy process of the Rural Reconstruction Commission proved an early instance of his difficulties with post-war expert studies. Wartime broadened direct Commonwealth regulation of primary industry, often by drawing on special powers that would have been politically unacceptable in peacetime. Persistently low prices for primary products throughout the preceding decade had encouraged an array of debt relief, financial assistance and dual pricing schemes that delayed adjustments and modernisation by propping up small, non-mechanised producers.<sup>54</sup> The Rural Reconstruction Commission was established in 1942 amidst the wartime loss of markets and shortages of essential materials and labour that suggested a bleak outlook for rural industries. Page appears to have assumed that the Commission would empathise with his views. In practice, it proved to be an independent-minded inquiry dominated by the banker C.R. Lambert and the agricultural scientist Samuel Wadham, with less input from fellow commissioners who included Page’s former departmental head, J.F. Murphy.

The Commission drew on economic advice and made many compromises. The Bureau of Agricultural Research, under the direction of John Crawford, drafted its submissions to Cabinet and the AAC vetted Commission reports prior to their publication.<sup>55</sup> The Commission approached agriculture as essentially an industry like any other, and so should also be subject to considerations of scale and efficiency. Government support should not be based on subsidisation that made farmers mendicants, but rather should stress aiding skilled and enterprising producers such as by offering technical advice

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<sup>53</sup> Cullather, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

<sup>54</sup> Macintyre, *Australia’s Boldest Experiment, op. cit.*, pp. 161-2.

<sup>55</sup> Troy Whitford and Don Boadle, ‘Australia’s Rural Reconstruction Commission, 1943-46: A Reassessment’, *Australian Journal of History and Politics*, vol. 54, issue 4, December 2008, pp. 532-3.

and social amenities.<sup>56</sup> Most of the Commission's recommendations required action by the states, not the Commonwealth.<sup>57</sup> Amongst the numerous underscored passages in Page's personal copy of the Commission's third report, on land utilisation and farm settlement, is a glowing assessment of the DMC as "a most beneficial influence by curbing the exuberance of many proposals."<sup>58</sup> But he would have been gravely disappointed by the Commission's failure to call unambiguously for revival of a similar such body. It instead vaguely recommended "detailed machinery for co-ordination of public works" to "ensure that productive capacity is correlated to prospective market demands."<sup>59</sup> This evident compromise matches comments about differences between the commissioners and with the Department of Post-War Reconstruction on how to implement Commonwealth-state co-operation on long-term policy planning. Wadham, critic of the AAC's Standing Committee, thought that rural people would reject expert planners and instead proposed leadership by selected progressive famers.<sup>60</sup>

### **Page's bids to lead post-war co-operative federalism, regionalism and higher education**

Page's efforts to influence the Commonwealth government's post-war reconstruction strategies focussed on federalism, regionalism, higher education and the Clarence River. His ideas had enough overlap with the government's post-war vision for it at least to understand and formally respond to his many entreaties, but through a veil of refusal to share power with him.

Changes in modes of policy formulation and the rise of nationally-led planning had significant implications for attitudes to federalism. A majority view emerged favouring centralism, which left Page playing an important contrary role as advocate of a co-operative federalism that institutionalised Commonwealth and

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<sup>56</sup> Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-50, 168-73.

<sup>57</sup> A.W. Martin and Janet Penny, 'The Rural Reconstruction Commission, 1943-47', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 29, 2, 1983, pp. 219, 222.

<sup>58</sup> Rural Reconstruction Commission, *Third Report, Land Utilisation and Farm Settlement*, The Commission, Canberra, 1944, p. 93.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93, 97.

<sup>60</sup> Whitford and Boadle, *op. cit.*, pp. 531-4.

state policy collaboration. The dominant intellectual attitude to federalism was that total Commonwealth ascendancy over the states was inevitable and desirable, as set out in the fullest contemporary study, the historian Gordon Greenwood's 1946 *The Future of Australian Federalism*.<sup>61</sup> Greenwood considered federalism merely a stage on the way to a concentration of political power that matched the nation's growing economic unification, albeit with scope remaining to delegate policy implementation to the local level. Reminiscent as this was of Page's own national policy-regional implementation split, Greenwood otherwise assailed co-operative federalism as "dilatatory and ineffective" despite having been given a "fair trial."<sup>62</sup>

Active support for co-operative federalism did not extend much beyond Page and his confirmed admirers, such as Drummond.<sup>63</sup> At the 1942 Constitutional Convention Page had proposed Commonwealth-state co-ordinating councils that would elevate development to a national imperative, and "the whole administration of this huge business organisation could be withdrawn from politics altogether."<sup>64</sup> These would "either induce the states to place definite agreed-on powers in the Constitution into the hands of the Commonwealth, or some agreement as to what parts of each of these subjects should be handled by the Commonwealth would be arrived at." Page even suggested "a permanent organisation" for determining state and Commonwealth powers, and harked back to his National Council idea of 1938-39.<sup>65</sup>

After the 1944 referendum, Page increasingly turned to public appeals via the popular press. He portrayed successful co-operative mechanisms ranging from the Loan Council down to the River Murray Commission as collectively establishing an unanswerable case for institutionalised co-operation across

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<sup>61</sup> Galligan, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>62</sup> Gordon Greenwood, *The Future of Australian Federalism: A Commentary on the Working of the Constitution*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1946, pp. 298-9, 303-4.

<sup>63</sup> Drummond had long concurred with Page on this and other issues. In his 1933 lectures collectively entitled *Australian Problems of Government: Federation vs. Unification*, Drummond called the Loan Council "a striking indication of what can be achieved by this type of machinery" and proposed a national planning council of education ministers. See David Drummond, *Australian Problems of Government: Federation vs. Unification*, Armidale, c. 1934, pp. 15-6; and Drummond, *The Future of Education in Australia*, Armidale, 1954, pp. 9-11.

<sup>64</sup> 'Sir Earle Page – Constitutional Convention, Canberra, 1/12/42', EPP, folder 888.

<sup>65</sup> Speech by Page to Constitutional Convention, 26 November 1942, EPP, folder 888.

finance, industrial policy, transport and power generation: effectively “a Cabinet of governments.”<sup>66</sup> (Page in one post-war speech even made a Wellsian reference to federalism as a basis for eventual “world government”).<sup>67</sup> Coombs noted a pattern of the Commonwealth using its financial powers to set post-war policy and then leaving implementation to state governments, but considered this a regrettable necessity following the Commonwealth’s failure to secure the necessary constitutional authority for itself.<sup>68</sup>

Two other great Page passions proved more central than co-operative federalism to Commonwealth post-war reconstruction policy – regionalism and decentralisation. The mid-forties marked the high point of official and intellectual interest in these concepts. The policies of the Chifley government bore distinct similarities to Page’s views of a generation earlier, albeit amid differences on whether regional entities should have sovereign status. In the 1920s and 1930s such causes had mainly been driven by new statism, with Page the main figure to look further towards nationwide change. As the post-war period loomed, support for regionalism and decentralisation broadened beyond the Country Party-linked elite Page knew so well. It attracted not just the policy-orientated intellectuals with which Australia now abounded such as Bland (now a convert to new states) and MacDonald Holmes, but increasingly also more technocratic government-based supporters such as Coombs.

Page’s sense of personally owning regionalism and decentralisation led him to expect a commensurately major role in their implementation. He used the press to help spread the widespread perception in Australia that the TVA stood for regional planning at its best, drawing credibility from actually having visited the TVA, including when en route home in July 1942. After his return, he called for intermediate level regional bodies to sit between the Commonwealth and the states, “unifying the principles of local knowledge and initiative with those of

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<sup>66</sup> Page, ‘Federal State Conflict – Co-operation Needed for Effective Government,’ in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 February 1945, p. 2; also speech to Constitutional Association of New South Wales, Sydney, 13 September 1948, copy at EPP, folder 1033. Bland was the Association’s Vice-President.

<sup>67</sup> Page speech to Constitutional Association of New South Wales, Sydney, *ibid.* H.G. Wells had long been the foremost advocate of a united world government.

<sup>68</sup> Coombs, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60, 62.

central supervision and assistance.”<sup>69</sup> The TVA was the model by which Australia could “follow the American example of establishing regional organisations which control physical and geographical units which often may involve handling parts of different states”, such as northern New South Wales and southern Queensland, and the Murray and Snowy region. Regional authorities would implement national policies determined by a Federal Power Commission, a Federal Water Commission and a Ministry of Food.<sup>70</sup> Page also wanted greatly expanded tied Commonwealth grants to finance big projects that the states could not implement alone, such as airports and rural electrification, as “federal aid unites skilfully the principles of local initiative and central supervision.”<sup>71</sup> His enthusiasm evinced his not infrequent unawareness of how others might not be quite so moved by his visions: in December 1944 he made an international radio broadcast to the people of wartime Britain and the US on water and power issues on the north coast of New South Wales.<sup>72</sup>

Page’s expectation of receptiveness to his ideas on decentralisation and regionalism ignored fundamental differences between his world view and that of the Commonwealth government. He thought that decentralisation had been encouraged by the wartime siting of munitions factories in country towns and the application of “an Australian uniform rate book” to the transport of government goods by rail that overcame the centralised focus of rail systems. (Page had long argued that differential rail freight rates channelled trade to capital cities rather than “natural outlets”.<sup>73</sup>) But contemporary official accounts instead attributed the elevation of decentralisation and regional planning into the policy mainstream to the federal government’s conduct of the war effort. In its 1949 monograph *Regional Planning in Australia*, the Department of Post-War Reconstruction pointed to the precedent of the wartime regional organisation of government administration.<sup>74</sup> It also credited Curtin with being

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<sup>69</sup> Page in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 February 1945, p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> Page speech ‘Australian Power and Water Development,’ 16 June 1945, EPP, folder 1205.

<sup>71</sup> Page in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 February 1945, p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> EPP, folder 1077.

<sup>73</sup> ‘History of Decentralisation: Speech by Sir Earle Page’, in *Decentralisation and New State Movement*, Decentralisation and New State Movement Convention, Armidale, 1948, pp. 27, 34.

<sup>74</sup> Department of Post-War Reconstruction, *Regional Planning in Australia: A History of Progress and Review of Regional Planning Activities Through the Commonwealth*, Canberra 1949, pp. vii, 1. Regionally-based structures were thought capable of continuing to function

impressed by a “marked tendency” for local councils to propose projects for their respective regions. The Department’s enthusiasm for community as a basis for a new social order took further inspiration from the co-operative efforts of the South Australian town Nuriootpa to provide local facilities to help retain its young residents.<sup>75</sup> Coombs recalled other influences, including the TVA, writers such as Lewis Mumford and the Rural Reconstruction Commission’s stress on the local provision of rural amenities. “It is difficult in retrospect”, he wrote, “to recapture the intellectual excitement which these ideas generated.”<sup>76</sup> Coombs’s Department reissued an Army Education Service Current Affairs Bulletin that condemned centralism as contributing to every social ill from housing shortages to “weakening of citizenship.”<sup>77</sup>

In October 1944 Curtin proposed to all six Premiers an ambitious programme of co-operative regionalisation to promote decentralisation and national security. The states would define regional boundaries and survey local resources, then form “representative regional advisory bodies.”<sup>78</sup> These were to collectively create a national network of 97 Regional Development Committees, through each of which state and local government representatives and other nominees would prepare local development plans. Curtin identified the Murray Valley, Newcastle and the Northern Territory as deserving particular attention – not the Clarence Valley.<sup>79</sup> His government was claiming the decentralisation-regionalisation concept as its own: its public pronouncements ignored Page, the Country Party and new state movements. (Nor was there reference, it appears, to antecedents in the ALP’s pre-war platform). Curtin’s regionalism, however, gained only limited political traction. Committees were formed in just

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following the disruption of central command. Michael Howard adds that the first use of regional planning in a post-war context was at the inaugural meeting of the Reconstruction Sub-Committee on Public Works in May 1942; see his *Advocacy and Resistance: The Question of a Post-war Commonwealth Government Role in Community Facilities, Town Planning and Regional Planning, 1939-52*, Urban Research Unit Working Paper No. 9, Australian National University, Canberra, 1988, p. 21. The concept also received support from the Commonwealth Housing Commission in its 1944 *Final Report*, see Howard, pp. 22-3.

<sup>75</sup> Macintyre, *Australia’s Boldest Experiment*, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-8; see also Coombs, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>76</sup> Coombs, *ibid.*, pp. 59-60, 62.

<sup>77</sup> Australian Army Education Service, Current Affairs Bulletin, *Regionalism*, no date but c. 1945; copy in Ellis papers NLA, MS 1006, Box 13, folder 35.

<sup>78</sup> *Regional Planning in Australia*, *op. cit.*, pp. viii, 13.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Victoria, New South Wales and Tasmania, and remained strictly advisory bodies that failed to gain the full commitment of state governments or local councils.<sup>80</sup>

Another problem for Page was that widening interest in regionalism and decentralisation presented him with a far more diverse range of motivators and goals to navigate than had the Country Party-dominated agitation of the inter-war years. He would have applauded the call by F.K. Maher and J.I. Sullivan in a 1946 booklet for “vigorous, self-governing regions”, “severe limitations” on construction in the big cities and the harnessing of river systems (which noted Page’s efforts concerning the Clarence.<sup>81</sup>) But the Methodist Page was not part of the lively strand of Catholic regionalist thought with which Maher was closely associated through the National Secretariat for Catholic Action that he headed with B.A. Santamaria. Catholic social theorists were attracted by the religiosity of rural communities, hence the National Catholic Rural Movement advocating “the spiritual restoration of the country” through rural settlement.<sup>82</sup>

More secular intellectual support for decentralisation appeared in such journals as *Current Affairs Bulletin* and *Australian Quarterly*.<sup>83</sup> The diversity of interest was reflected in the range of speakers at a string of major conferences that addressed decentralisation, notably a January 1948 AIPS conference at Armidale, a New South Wales Local Government Association “Local Government School” of August 1948 and an All-Australian Federal Convention on constitutional change held in Sydney in July 1949. Participants included Bland, Harold Nicholas (the same of the Boundaries Royal Commission), Alex Gibson, Richard Windeyer, MacDonald Holmes, H.L. Harris, Drummond and Bruxner. Page spoke on new states at the All-Australian Federal Convention. Most intellectual supporters of decentralisation linked regionalism to national

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<sup>80</sup> Macintyre, *Australia’s Boldest Experiment*, *op. cit.*, pp. 414-5.

<sup>81</sup> F.K. Maher and J.I. Sullivan, *Regionalism in Australia*, Araluen Publishing Company, Melbourne 1946, pp. 3, 45, 46.

<sup>82</sup> Gerard Henderson, *Mr. Santamaria and the Bishops*, St Patrick’s College, Manly, 1982, p. 57; for Maher see the website of the Australian Catholic Historical Society, [www.australiancatholichistoricalsociety.com.au/timeline/timeline3.html](http://www.australiancatholichistoricalsociety.com.au/timeline/timeline3.html)

<sup>83</sup> See for example ‘Industries for the Country’ in *Current Affairs Bulletin*, 11 April 1949; and E.J. Tapp, ‘Decentralisation and the Individual’ in *Australian Quarterly*, June 1948, pp. 82-90.

and regional planning but some, including Bland and Gibson, saw it as a counter to centralised political control. Page's packaging of federal units with strong national government made it hard for him to use this increasingly Cold War-influenced argument.<sup>84</sup> Interest in decentralisation also contributed to a modest revival in new statism. The New England movement reappeared in June 1948 when a new organisation was established at Armidale presided over by Phillip Wright, a local grazier and prominent Country Party member. In March 1949 Premier Ned Hanlon of Queensland raised the subdivision of his home state, and a new local movement appeared at Townsville. Soon after, Premier Thomas Hollway of Victoria suggested a new state based on Gippsland and south-eastern NSW.<sup>85</sup>

Page contributed at least indirectly to this renewed interest in regionalism and decentralisation by having helped maintain such ideas in political discourse since the last revival in the early 1930s. Although most 1940s proponents worked to community-oriented agendas more directly orientated to addressing rural poverty than Page's grander nation-wide vision, some nonetheless matched particular ideas he had publicised nationally over decades. At the AIPS conference, Harris was conceptually closest to Page's ideas about the potential of decentralisation to draw out the best social qualities. It would, he said, lead to "a heightened social consciousness and a quickening of the community spirit with new standards and values and richer personalities."<sup>86</sup> A 1944 booklet published by the Institution of Engineers echoed Page's National

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<sup>84</sup> Bland, now well-established as Australia's leading scholar of public administration, became especially outspoken on inserting regional administrative entities between local and state governments so as to counter centralism. Gibson saw strong state and regional authorities as "sure means by which the effect of centralised power and industrial concentration can be obviated." See F.A. Bland, 'Post-War Constitutional Reconstruction', *The Institute of Public Administration*, vol. 2, no. 3, September-December 1940, pp. 136-55; 'Towards Regionalism', *The Institute of Public Administration*, vol. 4, no. 8, December 1943, pp. 379-85; and 'Decentralization – the Machinery of Government' in H.L. Harris, H.S. Nicholas, F.A. Bland, A. Mainerd and T. Hytten, *Decentralization*, Angus and Robertson in conjunction with the Australian Institute of Political Science, Sydney, 1948, pp. 67-120. For Gibson, see 'The Implications of Decentralisation,' in *Decentralisation and New State Movement Convention, Decentralisation and New State Movement, Armidale Convention, June 1948, op. cit.*, pp. 7, 10.

<sup>85</sup> See Farrell, 'Opting Out and Opting In', *op. cit.*, p. 148, and Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party, op. cit.*, p. 277.

<sup>86</sup> Harris added that decentralisation was "essentially a population policy directed to the preservation of the race and to the improvement of its quality", a racial cast that Page did not employ: H.L. Harris *et al.*, *Decentralization, op. cit.*, pp. 18, 20.

Council by proposing the nation's division into six regions, all overseen by a National Planning Authority working with regional planning commissions.<sup>87</sup>

Even Maher and Sullivan upheld the link between decentralisation and planning by recommending the use of freight schemes, tariffs and electrification as planning tools, much as Page had proposed.<sup>88</sup>

By the immediate post-war period, three decades of disappointment had made Page alert to opportunities to broaden his case for decentralisation and regionalisation. His major statements reflected the post-war interest in regional equity in social amenities. In his foremost speech of this period on new states, delivered in June 1948 to a convention in Armidale, Page declared that decentralisation would “give equal opportunity to all Australian citizens in facilities of education, culture and health, in security of work for their families, in professional and business careers and in the provision of domestic amenities.” Page became increasingly prone to quoting selectively from major intellectual figures: his Armidale speech drew on Mumford's writings on self-governing political units large enough (as Page put it) to “embrace a sufficient range of interests and small enough to keep these interests in focus and make them a subject of direct collective concern.”<sup>89</sup> With the advent of the Cold War, Page again employed defence-related arguments. “Australia's great need,” he told the All-Australian Federal Convention (convened by Bland's New South Wales Constitutional League), “is to get enough people quickly to develop her latent resources and thus ensure the defence of our Continent,” for which “local self-government by the creation of new states with consequent acceleration of local development is the real answer.”<sup>90</sup>

The higher quality debate on regionalism helped develop Page's own ideas. He had long been neither clear nor consistent about how he defined a viable

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<sup>87</sup> C.M. Longfield and T.A. Lang, *Regional Planning*, 1944, first published in *The Journal of The Institution of Engineers, Australia*, August 1943, copy in Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 12, series 6A, folder 29.

<sup>88</sup> Maher and Sullivan, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>89</sup> ‘History of Decentralisation: Speech by Sir Earle Page’, *op. cit.*, pp. 25, 29.

<sup>90</sup> Earle Page, ‘Why New States?’, speech to All-Australian Federal Convention 25-26 July 1949, in F.A. Bland (ed.), *Changing the Constitution: Proceedings of the All-Australian Federal Convention, 25th and 26th July 1949*, The New South Wales Constitutional League, Sydney, 1950, p. 95.

region for a new state or federal unit. But in speeches during 1945 he referred their being defined by common farming conditions and similar “agricultural, scientific and research problems” of water, irrigation and fodder conservation.<sup>91</sup> His new federal units were also to include those parts of large states that were too distant to be governed effectively from an existing state capital. Page specified several regions as particularly suited for regional development, namely the Murray Valley, southern, central and northern Queensland, and northern and central New South Wales.<sup>92</sup> In 1949 he spoke of a prospective eighteen new states as the beginning of a process of national subdivision into smaller units. He made clearer than ever his disdain for the “boa-contractor” of the big city, beset by “all sorts of social diseases,” and proposed towns of from 30,000 up to 250,000 inhabitants.<sup>93</sup>

Decentralisation and regionalisation still struggled to be actually implemented even in this post-war period when the political portents had initially seemed good. The dwindling of fears of a post-war slump removed the sense of urgency: gradually policy debate shifted away from regionalism and planning towards the politically popular dismantling of government controls. One casualty was enthusiasm for the TVA, an example of Page’s tendency to leave drawbacks to be pointed out by others. William McKell, Labor Premier of New South Wales since 1941 and a decentralisation enthusiast, visited the TVA in 1945 and publicly pronounced it “not generally adaptable to Australian conditions.” Far from being the strong sovereign body of legend, the TVA received considerable federal funding and its regional powers were limited essentially to planning and research.<sup>94</sup> Significantly for Page’s post-war role, McKell’s findings were quoted at length in the Department of Post-War Reconstruction’s *Regional Planning in Australia*.<sup>95</sup> Coombs himself later admitted that wartime interest in community-led regionalisation eventually

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<sup>91</sup> Speech entitled ‘Australian power and water development’, 1945, EPP, folder 1994 (i).

<sup>92</sup> Speech of 19 June 1945 to the House, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, p. 3270.

<sup>93</sup> Earle Page ‘Why New States?’, speech to All-Australian Federal Convention, 25-26 July 1949, *op. cit.*, pp. 99, 103-4.

<sup>94</sup> *The Tennessee Valley Authority (USA): Report by the Hon. W.J. McKell KC, MLA, December 1945*, Government Printer, Sydney, 1945, pp. 13-4. Page was later one of several Opposition members who boycotted McKell’s swearing-in as Governor-General.

<sup>95</sup> *Regional Planning in Australia. op. cit.*, p. 17.

dwindled to a more prosaic emphasis on local administrative efficiency and the delivery of specific projects. Regional planning, he said, “flew in the face of the logic of the developing world economic system”, which was “destroying the economic cohesion of regional economies.”<sup>96</sup>

Another post-war policy field in which Page similarly attempted to engage with a surge in interest but then encountered an unfavourable political environment was higher education. Post-war reconstruction saw Australia’s first extensive public debates on the role of universities. Attitudes to tertiary education changed greatly during the 1940s as the Commonwealth began funding universities as a national investment.<sup>97</sup> Commonwealth grants for universities dated from 1936, but it was Curtin who in 1943 signalled a major commitment to widening access to tertiary education by establishing the Universities Commission to supervise the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme for returned servicemen and women.

The wider – and lively – post-war debate on universities is a further instance of Page’s views being so strongly tied to decentralisation and regionalism that they veered far from the mainstream. During the war, Australian universities for the first time played a major practical public role by providing technical support for the war effort, such as in controlling malaria and manufacturing gun sights.<sup>98</sup> Tension developed between casting universities as bastions of civilising knowledge, or whether they should be reorientated towards a vocational role that addressed the goals of post-war reconstruction, as encouraged by Coombs.<sup>99</sup> Page sought to influence this emerging debate by proposing a unique alternative to the expansion of existing metropolitan universities. He does not appear to have been drawn to the view, common today, that the main merit of rural universities was the direct boosting of economic prospects in their

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<sup>96</sup> Coombs, *op. cit.*, pp. 64, 65.

<sup>97</sup> Alison Mackinnon and Helen Proctor, ‘Education’ in Bashford and Macintyre, volume two, *op. cit.*, pp. 438-9.

<sup>98</sup> Page assumed a significant role in malaria control, mainly through his appointment by Curtin to the Advisory War Council, 1942-43 and 1944-45. He remained proud of this work, to which he devoted most of a chapter of his memoirs; see *Truant Surgeon, op. cit.*, chapter 41.

<sup>99</sup> Hannah Forsyth, *A History of the Modern Australian University*, NewSouth, Sydney, 2014, pp. 25, 39, 49.

immediate regions.<sup>100</sup> Instead, he drew on his ideals of decentralisation and institutional scale to stretch narrower agendas by proposing that universities serve as tools of social construction. This was a fine example of how widely he could apply his basic views to produce a coherent alternative to the mainstream of opinion.

Page set out his vision of higher education in his May 1945 contribution to the parliamentary debate on the Re-establishment and Employment Bill to support the education of returned servicemen and women. Returnees should not be relegated “to large universities or big technical colleges, where they are regarded more or less as ciphers or numbers instead of personalities, [which] may wreck their whole future individual life and their value to the nation.” They should instead be directed to small institutions such as the New England and Canberra University Colleges, “where much more personal and intimate contact is made with the teachers.” (Page recalled here how during his medical studies he was one of only nineteen students). He joined calls for the Commonwealth to take a firmer lead on funding universities and other levels of education via a central controlling body.<sup>101</sup> An adjunct here was Page’s interest in a proposed national university in Canberra. This should also be cast as a small residential institution, which could train diplomats and “make certain that boys and girls shall be able to obtain a first-class knowledge of international affairs.”<sup>102</sup>

Page’s perception of education as a means of social engineering implies a certain faith in human malleability. No more effusive statement of this exists

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<sup>100</sup> See for example a 2011 report by Sarah Richardson, ‘Higher education and community benefits: The Role of Regional Provision,’ *Joining the Dots Research Briefing*, Australian Council for Educational Research, September 2011: 1-11. This study dwells on social and hidden economic benefits.

<sup>101</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 16 May 1945, pp. 1793. There is some contemporary evidence that university size indeed had a bearing on undergraduate performance. In 1944 the Commonwealth Universities Commission released data indicating that despite lower entrance standards, undergraduates at the New England University College were ahead of their Sydney University counterparts after only one year of study; see statement by the Advisory Council, New England University College, 17 January 1945, ‘The Great Success of New England University College; Statistical Report From the Commonwealth Universities Commission’, EPP, folder 1088 part (i). In 1939 University of Sydney Chancellor Charles Blackburn described Armidale as being “more conducive to a spirit of true learning than one can find in a large, over-crowded, industrialised city”; quoted in Jordan, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>102</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 21 September 1944, pp. 1209-10.

than the prescription for secondary schooling he presented to the June 1947 Macleay River Teachers' Association Educational Conference. To Page, "a district high school is a wonderful instrument" to "mould the lives of students, influence the destiny of districts and, thereby, control the fate of the nation." His ideal school would have "noble buildings and grounds of ample proportion." Curricula must create the "groundwork of understanding" via rural, technical and cultural strands. The school library should impart "a love of books that will carry on to adult life." All country high schools should offer free accommodation to help "build a community spirit and interest in the school and the industries of the district." Young men and women would "get to know one another in a way that is not possible at present." Children from local towns would experience "a year or two of practical life on the land."<sup>103</sup> As he recorded in notes for another speech on education, "I have thought of everything and everything fits in its place."<sup>104</sup>

Some support for Page's vision came mainly from that hotbed of decentralism, New England. In 1948 the Warden of New England University College, J.P. Belshaw, wrote in favour of residential institutions that used the tutorial system and reached out to local regions. A.J. Greenhalgh of Armidale Teachers College called for state-run boarding schools where rural students could overcome the population dispersal that otherwise rendered rural area schools impractical.<sup>105</sup> But more prominent in national debate were a series of eleven widely read booklets issued by the influential Australian Council for Educational Research over 1943 to 1946. These were collectively entitled *The Future of Education* and reflect how singular Page's views on decentralised education were. Authors included such city-based academic figures as John Medley, Vice-Chancellor of Melbourne University, the historian John La Nauze and Eric Ashby of Sydney University Botany Department, who would become a prolific

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<sup>103</sup> Speech by Page 'Educational Needs of a Rural Community,' to the Macleay River Teachers' Association Educational Conference, Kempsey, 18 June 1947, EPP, folder 2504. Such sentiments were features of his school speeches of the time – Page made similar comments at Grafton Public School in March 1947, EPP, folder 725.

<sup>104</sup> See speech notes, EPP, folder 2620. Undated, but similarity of content suggests being from this same 1940s period.

<sup>105</sup> J.P. Belshaw, 'Decentralisation of University Education', *Australian Quarterly*, December 1948, pp. 67-76; A.J. Greenhalgh, 'The Plight of Rural Education', *Australian Quarterly*, September 1949, p. 76.

author on higher education.<sup>106</sup> Despite touching on many fundamental educational issues, they only fleetingly addressed Page's agenda. Ashby's *Universities in Australia* was an articulate defence of the traditional concept of a university which just passingly referred to founding junior colleges in country towns to teach matriculation. He was lukewarm about the practicality of rural universities, and rejected residential universities outright.<sup>107</sup> Page would also have been disappointed by the Rural Reconstruction Commission's coverage of education. It offered only qualified support for rural high schools and said little about tertiary education beyond concluding that more than one university in each state was "unrealistic", while conceding some scope for rural university colleges.<sup>108</sup>

### **Page again champions hydroelectricity: the Snowy versus the Clarence**

In the latter half of the 1940s, Page's interaction with the Chifley government narrowed to focus on hydroelectricity and the damming of the Clarence River. This drew out his vision of post-war reconstruction to the fullest, but also his frustration that the Clarence did not feature centrally in Commonwealth policy. It nonetheless became the post-war reconstruction issue on which he had the most influence on government. Page's success in keeping this project under Commonwealth consideration and, to a lesser extent, that of two states is a case study of his undaunted persistence and tactical flexibility. Without Page, the Clarence would almost certainly have faded entirely in the face of criticisms by engineers and rivalry from the more glamorous and promising Snowy proposal. Post-war reconstruction presented Page with his best ever chance of getting this treasured project up and running, aided by the Commonwealth's fear that it needed major public works projects on hand to create employment should the post-war economic boom falter.

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<sup>106</sup> W.F. Connell, *The Australian Council for Educational Research 1930-80*, Australian Council for Educational Research, Hawthorn, 1980, pp. 143-7. Mackinnon and Proctor comment on the influence of ACER in their chapter in Bashford and Macintyre, volume two, *op. cit.*, p. 434.

<sup>107</sup> Eric Ashby, *Universities in Australia*, Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne, 1944, pp. 26-8.

<sup>108</sup> Rural Reconstruction Commission, *Seventh Report, Rural Amenities*, The Commission, Canberra, 1945, pp. 21, 24. The sixth report touched briefly on technical training and how education could contribute to community spirit.

Page foresaw early that post-war reconstruction could create an opportunity for the Clarence region. In October 1943 he convened a meeting of state and federal parliamentarians, including Drummond and Bruxner, at Parliament House Sydney to discuss northern electrification.<sup>109</sup> They were especially interested in having a new transmission line link Newcastle, the Nymboida and Brisbane, and in August 1944 McKell agreed to have the Railways Department's power station at Newcastle connected to the Nymboida facility by a 66,000 volt transmission line.<sup>110</sup> This marks Page's only major practical success in rural electrification other than the establishment of the Nymboida station in 1923.

Page had many obstacles to overcome before the Clarence River could be exploited. Proposals to harness the Snowy had a longer provenance, dating back to an irrigation proposal of 1884.<sup>111</sup> Debate during the 1930s indicates that although Page's ideas about hydroelectricity had gained some acceptance in the Country Party, much of this was channelled into support for the Snowy. His parliamentary deputy Thomas Paterson told the Snowy River Hydroelectric Scheme Conference of November 1936 that electricity was "perhaps the most important factor in your civilisation," and attributed the success of the Nymboida to a flat rate "for farm and factory alike." But he spoke primarily of the Snowy, stressing its potential to encourage industrial development east of the Great Dividing Range (encompassing his electorate of Gippsland.<sup>112</sup>) The Snowy also had a clear edge amongst professional engineers. Gibson wrote in his 1929 report on power development that the Clarence had the disadvantage of requiring the construction of large storage reservoirs.<sup>113</sup> The president of the Institution of Engineers reported that the Clarence and the Nymboida were estimated to be capable of generating only a tenth of the hydroelectric power

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<sup>109</sup> See open letter to press concerning this meeting, 21 October 1943, EPP, folder 2083.

<sup>110</sup> McKell to Page, 8 August 1944, EPP, folder 2086; see also McKell to J.B. Shand, 12 January 1944, concerning initial reluctance to support this proposal, EPP, folder 2083.

<sup>111</sup> *The Australian Encyclopedia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, second edition, 1958, volume 8, pp. 171-2. A Snowy River Hydroelectric Development League appeared in 1936. Hardman, *op. cit.*, provides a full outline of early proposals to harness the Snowy.

<sup>112</sup> Speech to the 'Snowy River Hydro-electric Scheme Conference', Cooma, 27 November 1936, EPP, folder 2704.

<sup>113</sup> Gibson, *Report on Power Development in Australia, op. cit.*, p. 23.

available in the Australian Alps.<sup>114</sup> Most media reports from the 1930s and early 1940s on Australia's water resources failed even to mention the Clarence.<sup>115</sup>

To-day, the Snowy Mountains Scheme is commonly presented as the prime contrast between post-war nation building and a latter-day absence of national foresight. Page became very aware of a growing possibility that this project would leave no room for the Clarence, and fought accordingly. Although he only occasionally directly criticised the Snowy – it was still a regional hydroelectric initiative, after all – what support he proffered was always highly qualified, especially as he doubted its breadth of regional and national vision. He asserted that the Clarence could provide a starting point for a national grid by linking Sydney, Newcastle and Brisbane. The Clarence would be focussed on power generation, whereas there was division over whether the Snowy would be primarily for irrigation or for electricity.<sup>116</sup> In 1958, by which time the Snowy had long been under way, he told the House that the project “will lose its true significance if the water and power is not used to achieve that decentralised development in adjoining districts which is vital to the survival of the Australian nation.”<sup>117</sup>

Page's post-war vision of hydroelectricity came to incorporate three main strategies – local oversight by powerful regional authorities, national planning, and using The Gorge project on the Clarence as the start point for a nationwide network of hydroelectric dams. This national synthesis readily distinguished him from innumerable other boosters of local projects. He spoke of how better

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<sup>114</sup> H.R. Harper, February 1934 presidential address to the Institution of Engineers, Australia, copy at EPP, folder 1059.

<sup>115</sup> See for example Lewis R. East, 'Water Conservation in Australia,' in the magazine *Walkabout*, vol. 2, no. 11, November 1936, pp. 33-8.

<sup>116</sup> Statement 'Australian Power Development – The Importance of the Clarence River Gorge Hydro-Electric Scheme', undated but clearly from this period, EPP, folder 2047. This division over the fundamental focus of the Snowy Scheme was driven by state rivalries – New South Wales favoured irrigation, Victoria hydroelectricity – and delayed its implementation; see Hardman, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 214-24.

<sup>117</sup> EPP, folder 2333; the Hansard record of this speech is somewhat different. See *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 13 May 1958, pp. 1742-5. Page's 1949 speech on the legislation for the Snowy is a statement of his hopes that the Snowy would be the starting point for a nationwide power scheme and that the Clarence would not be forgotten; see *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 22 June 1949, pp. 1351-8.

land use via the utilisation of water and electricity could support a national population of 20 million, leading to the “stabilisation of the land industries on a reproductive basis.” A unified national electricity grid would also have a fundamental social value, by “giving the whole of the north of New South Wales and southern Queensland and, in time, the whole of Australia, a high common factor of mutual interest that must bind us together and help us all to appreciate, understand and sympathise with each other’s local problems.”<sup>118</sup> Page again tied such ideas to the wider imperatives of the times by exploiting fears of war and famine, observing that development of the Clarence under a regional authority “would aid that essential factor to permanent world peace – good food, and plenty of it.”<sup>119</sup> Since his time in London, Page had frequently dwelt on how food security could contribute to international stability, linking this to guaranteed prices for producers and surveys of nutritional needs. Such ideas had wide support, including from two figures well known to Page, Stanley Bruce and the Australian trade adviser in London, F.L. McDougall.<sup>120</sup>

On local oversight, Page foresaw that development of the Clarence “should be undertaken by a governmental partnership consisting of the Commonwealth, New South Wales and Queensland Governments, combined with a regional authority” that was “clothed with sufficient power to handle effectively all the powers that this huge development would involve.”<sup>121</sup> As the Australian federal system had a “blind spot” where no clear state or federal powers applied, a Clarence Valley Authority was needed, “on all fours with the Tennessee authority.” Australia should emulate American initiative to “annihilate the distances of space and time, and to bring the amenities of modern civilisation to the most remotely situated peoples in our land.”<sup>122</sup> Page complemented his appeals to governments with public proselytising, an increasingly common practice of his during this politically-challenged stage of his career. He detailed

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<sup>118</sup> ‘Dr. Earle Page’s Prescription for National Health & Development’, *op. cit.*

<sup>119</sup> *Clarence River Hydro-Electric Gorge Scheme*, *op. cit.*, introduction and p. 1.

<sup>120</sup> See for example Page’s speech to the House recorded in *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 14 September 1944, pp. 836-7. On Bruce and McDougall as advocates of food’s role in post-war peace see Lee, *op. cit.*, pp. 168-70, 174-7.

<sup>121</sup> Earle Page, *Clarence River Hydro-Electric Gorge Scheme*, *op. cit.*, quotes from introduction.

<sup>122</sup> Broadcast by Page on 2NR (the ABC’s Grafton station), 17 December 1944, text at EPP folder 1077. Page slightly earlier proposed a Clarence Valley Authority in a speech of June 1944 to the Grafton Chamber of Commerce; see EPP, folder 1877 (ii).

this vision of a regionally-managed Clarence in his short but lavish 1944 book *Clarence River Hydro-Electric Gorge Scheme*, replete with diagrams, photographs and maps.<sup>123</sup> Page personally arranged its production and the distribution of scores of copies to ministers, government agencies, private companies, Australian embassies, libraries and Curtin himself.<sup>124</sup>

On national planning, Page in 1944 foresaw a planned future Australia with a more densely settled countryside that required “a well-organised agricultural industry” supported by electricity, ample water and “a guaranteed payable price for their products.” This necessitated guidance by planning authorities – his proposed Federal Power Commission, Federal Water Commission and Ministry of Food – but with electricity providing the catalyst. Implementation of this planning-based strategy was to be carried out through an array of TVA-style regional authorities with full executive powers.<sup>125</sup> The new national grid would encompass both hydro and thermal sources in exploiting “hitherto neglected, isolated power possibilities.”<sup>126</sup>

Page’s vision for an Australia-wide network of hydroelectric dams was set out in separate but essentially consistent statements over the next few years. The harnessing of the Nymboida back in 1923 had just been a stage one for the Clarence region, “to make the surrounding district electricity conscious.” The second stage would be a 220 foot dam at The Gorge that could generate “over 42,000 kilowatts continuously.” To enable this, “an agreement for Clarence development with such wide regional and inter-state implications should be made between the Commonwealth, state and local governing authorities”, using “the pattern of the Migration Agreement between Australia and Britain.”<sup>127</sup> Damming the Clarence could be followed by a “nationwide drive” to develop the continent, starting with deploying army surveyors to assess regional water resources before constructing new dams and hydroelectric stations tied to a

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<sup>123</sup> Earle Page, *Clarence River Hydro-Electric Gorge Scheme*, *op. cit.* A map from this booklet showing Page’s proposed dam network is provided in chapter 1 of this thesis, figure 4.

<sup>124</sup> See for example Page to Curtin, 24 August 1944, NAA, A461; AK 423/1/1, Water and Electricity – General – Clarence River Hydro-Electric Development.

<sup>125</sup> Page speech ‘Australian Power and Water Development,’ 16 June 1945, EPP, folder 1205.

<sup>126</sup> Page, *Clarence River Hydro-Electric Gorge Scheme*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>127</sup> Public address by Page at Lismore, 6 June 1947, EPP, folder 874.

national grid. All along the east coast, new railways would link inland power centres to deep sea ports, including one at the mouth of the Clarence.<sup>128</sup> The spread of Page's Clarence model was to be funded by profits from the sale of electricity generated by each new dam, helped by a federal levy to fund grants that covered fifty per cent of the construction costs of expanding rural transmission.<sup>129</sup>

But persuading governments and experts posed a challenge for Page. In 1944-45 he had good grounds for hope, as the Commonwealth was beginning to cast around for public works projects to counteract the anticipated post-war slump. He had no hesitation in approaching the highest levels of government, including the Prime Minister. Curtin in March 1944 replied to Page noncommittally that the Clarence proposal was subject to prioritisation by the National Works Council and required state government support.<sup>130</sup> In December, Page switched his attention to Chifley as Minister for Post-War Reconstruction, suggesting a joint expert study of the Clarence by the Commonwealth and state governments.<sup>131</sup> Harry Brown, Commonwealth Co-ordinator-General of Works, was so keen that his main concern was that a study undertaken by the states alone could delay "vitally urgent post-war public works programs": perhaps the Commonwealth could instil momentum by offering to act as an impartial chair.<sup>132</sup> Following Page's approaches, Chifley wrote to the acting Premiers of New South Wales and of Queensland in May 1945 proposing a joint study by the three governments. He mentioned Page's support and described the project as possibly "one of the most important in Australia," relevant to the regional planning then being discussed with Premiers.<sup>133</sup> Page simultaneously pursued the engineering profession. In a rather technical speech to the Institution of Engineers, he predicted that the

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<sup>128</sup> 'Dr. Earle Page's Prescription for National Health & Development,' *op. cit.*

<sup>129</sup> Press release 'Full Development of the North Coast Rivers,' August 1946, EPP, folder 1724.

<sup>130</sup> Curtin to Page, 15 March 1944; also 'Collings' to Page on behalf of the Prime Minister, 11 July 1944, both EPP, folder 2086. (Probably Senator Joseph Collings, Minister for the Interior).

<sup>131</sup> Page to Chifley, 2 December 1944, NAA, A9816; 1944/487 Part 1; Clarence River Hydro-Electric Scheme by Sir Earle Page; see also Coombs to Harry Brown, Co-ordinator-General of Works, 19 January 1945, *op. cit.*

<sup>132</sup> Harry Brown to Coombs, 9 April 1945, *ibid.*; see also Coombs to Chifley, 12 April 1945, *ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> The acting Premiers were J.M. Baddeley of New South Wales and E.M. Hanlon of Queensland; Chifley letters of 18 May 1945, EPP, folder 1702.

problem of limited local demand of only about 20-25,000 kWh would be overcome by linking the Clarence to a national grid, under which it would sell 50,000 kWh to Brisbane “at less than half a penny a unit.”<sup>134</sup>

The federal system in practice proved a drag on Page’s national developmentalism. Significantly for the Clarence’s prospects, he attracted more interest from Queensland, which stood to benefit most from the electricity generated, than from the river’s host state of New South Wales.<sup>135</sup> Chifley’s appeal to the states elicited only rejection by both of Commonwealth involvement and a half-hearted commitment to conduct a short joint study of their own.<sup>136</sup> This study in December 1945 merely concluded that a fuller technical assessment was needed. The New South Wales-led inquiry that followed – the Clarence River Water Resources Investigation Committee, commonly called the Technical Committee – dragged on into 1951 as one of no less than seven expert post-war studies of the Clarence Valley in general or The Gorge in particular. Each was properly cautious about consumer demand for a project of such scale: none provided the decisive endorsement Page sought.

Yet it is also clear that Page’s persistence was keeping the Clarence at the forefront of high-level official attention, albeit amidst persistent doubts. In May 1946 Chifley’s successor as Minister for Post-War Reconstruction, John Dedman, wrote to Page stating bluntly that a TVA-style authority was “undesirable” but adding that the Commonwealth remained interested in the Clarence.<sup>137</sup> Dedman did not elaborate, but opposition from McKell would alone have rendered the TVA concept impractical. The paradox now facing Page was that the unexpected persistence of the post-war boom was working against big new projects. Far from unemployment being a problem, there were

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<sup>134</sup> Page speech to Institution of Engineers, April 1944, EPP, folder 2090 (day not given).

<sup>135</sup> The Chairman of the Queensland State Electricity Commission, S.F. Cochran, told Coombs in early 1945 that his state was “most interested” in Page’s Clarence proposal; letter to Coombs, 8 January 1945, NAA, A9816, 1944/487 Part 1, Clarence River Hydro-Electric Scheme by Sir Earle Page.

<sup>136</sup> See for example letters to Chifley from acting Premier Baddeley of 12 June 1945 and from Premier McKell of 20 November 1946 to Chifley, NAA, A461, AK 423/1/1, Water and Electricity – General – Clarence River Hydro-Electric Development.

<sup>137</sup> Dedman to Page, 23 May 1946 (writing on behalf of the Prime Minister), EPP, folder 2090.

shortages of labour and materials. A year later the Commonwealth's Controller of Electricity Supply, H.P. Moss, advised his departmental head in the Ministry of Munitions, John Jensen, that the Clarence proposal was still of interest but should be delayed until there was a need to alleviate unemployment or to cope with coal shortages.<sup>138</sup> When "the feared unemployment following close on the transition did not eventuate," Commonwealth interest in public works-based developmentalism dwindled, especially that which involved large, longer range projects.<sup>139</sup>

Nor would Page have liked the Rural Reconstruction Commission's mixed findings on electrification. In its first report it had agreed that to help raise country living standards it "should be a national objective to give every farm which if not too remote an opportunity to use electricity at a cost which is comparable with that which prevails in the cities."<sup>140</sup> But in its seventh report, the Commission directly challenged the assumption that hydroelectricity would be cheaper than thermal generation. It rejected uniform electricity tariffs as inequitable and also the extension of electricity to all farms, some of which were simply too isolated.<sup>141</sup> In a continent as dry as Australia, human and animal consumption should have first claim on water use, followed by irrigation and only thirdly hydroelectricity. As for the Clarence, the Commission paid far more attention to the Snowy and Ord Rivers.<sup>142</sup> So disappointed was Page with the Rural Reconstruction Commission's fleeting coverage of northern rivers that early in 1947 he invited the editors of 18 newspapers to join him on a grand tour of east coast rivers from the Brisbane to the Hunter.<sup>143</sup> As they set off, Page assured the seven who accepted that "with your help, I am confident that wide public interest can be aroused in the vast scope of development which is possible in this richly endowed coastal area."<sup>144</sup> Four hailed from local

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<sup>138</sup> T. Murdoch on behalf of the Controller, Electricity Supply to Secretary, Ministry of Munitions, 28 May 1947, NAA, MP61/1, 2/3/422, Clarence River Water Power Development.

<sup>139</sup> Coombs, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-7.

<sup>140</sup> Rural Reconstruction Commission, *First Report, A General Rural Survey*, The Commission, Canberra, 1944, p. 46.

<sup>141</sup> Rural Reconstruction Commission, *Seventh Report, op. cit.*, pp. 67, 73.

<sup>142</sup> Rural Reconstruction Commission, *Eighth Report, Irrigation, Water Conservation and Land Drainage*, The Commission, Canberra, 1945, pp. 24, 76.

<sup>143</sup> Page letters of 22 November 1946, EPP, folder 2105.

<sup>144</sup> Page in the *Daily Examiner*, 31 January 1947, p. 3, clipping in EPP, folder 2106.

newspapers in Page's native northern New South Wales: only three joined from publications in other regions, the *Courier-Mail* and *Telegraph* from Brisbane, and the *Newcastle Herald*.

As enthusiastic as ever, Page led his little band up and down the coast. His Grafton *Daily Examiner* reported delegation members having "rowed, rode, slithered and slashed their way up to the seat of the proposed dam and hydroelectric station."<sup>145</sup> Social goals were still forefront: Page told the seven that "it would be impossible to keep the people of the country in the country unless they had the amenities offering in the cities, and this has been shown by the Nymboida."<sup>146</sup> One editor afterwards politely complained to Page about "the sustained pressure of our tour."<sup>147</sup> The Queensland press gave Page good publicity with such headlines as "Surveys Prove Value of Scheme." But even the sympathetic Brisbane *Telegraph* concluded that along the coastal belt from Newcastle to the Queensland border "no market exists there for anywhere near 300,000 kilowatts of electricity, the planned output of the completed Gorge scheme", making Queensland's involvement crucial.<sup>148</sup>

Page remained so hopeful that he produced yet another booklet, *Clarence Water-Power Development*, its cover graced with a specially-commissioned stylised map of proposed dam sites. This detailed his plan for a 220 foot dam at The Gorge, to be followed by the construction of supplementary storages so that the whole Clarence system generated at least "125,000 kilowatts continuously" and irrigated 100,000 acres. As so often before, Page thought he had chosen his timing well: "At this psychological moment, which might never recur, an early decision could launch this outstanding development on a most auspicious and sound basis."<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> *Daily Examiner*, 4 February 1947, p. 2, clipping in EPP, folder 2106.

<sup>146</sup> *Macleay Argus*, 14 February 1947, clipping at EPP, folder 1075.

<sup>147</sup> Lyne Young of the Lismore *Northern Star* to Page, 25 February 1947, EPP, folder 2106.

<sup>148</sup> *Brisbane Telegraph*, 14 February 1947, clipping at EPP, folder 2106.

<sup>149</sup> Earle Page, *Clarence Water-Power Development*, *The Bulletin Newspaper*, Sydney, 1947, pp. 3, 23.

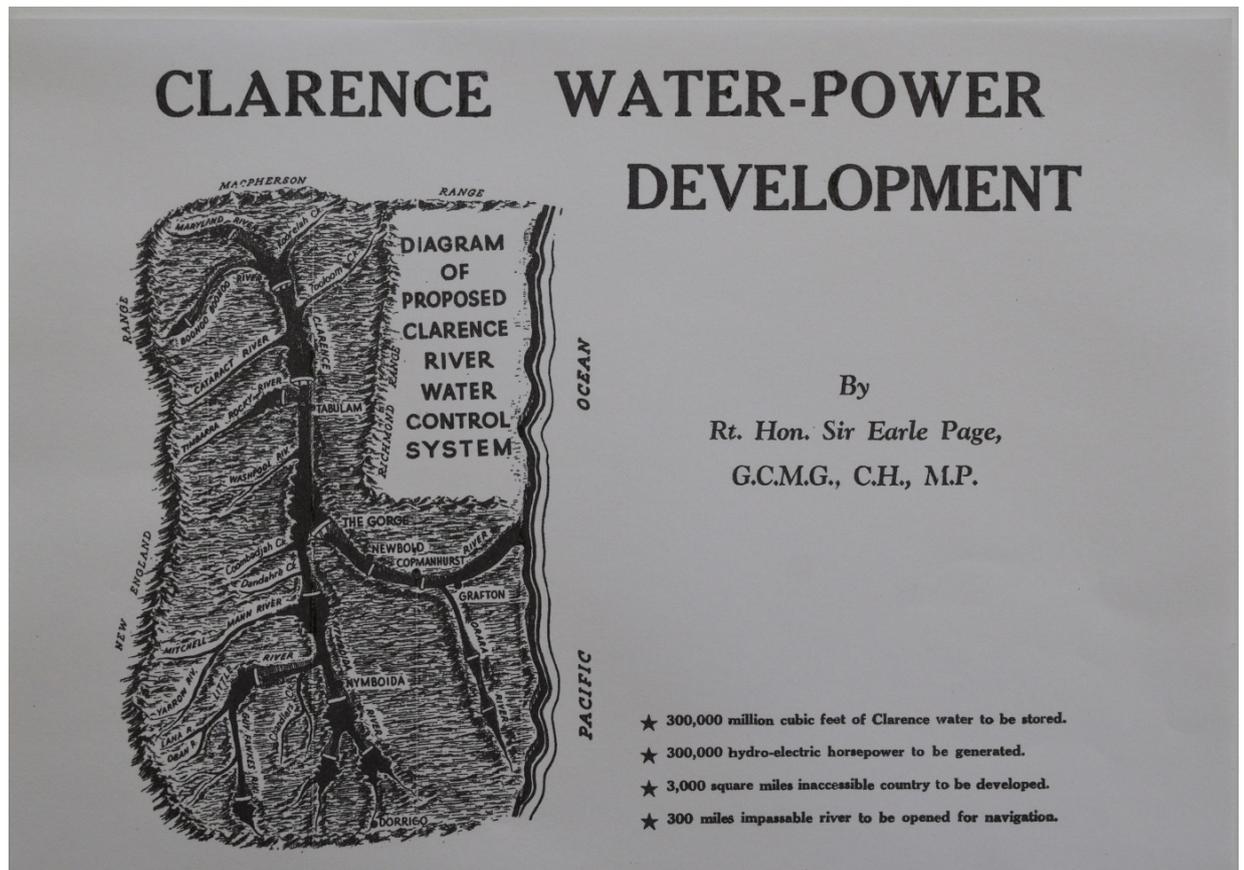


Figure 9: cover of Page's 1947 booklet, Clarence Water-Power Development.

As official interest shifted towards the Snowy, Page demonstrated his tactical flexibility by returning to the level of government and place where he had the most influence. Over 1948-9, he sought to reorganise local councils in the Clarence Valley into regional authorities based on the TVA model. He exhorted them to join forces so “a united North could have a definite voice in the extent and manner of that [Gorge dam] development and the disposal and the distribution of the product.” Page proclaimed himself specially qualified to lead this effort, as he had been personally responsible for both “the inauguration of the Clarence County Council Scheme” and “developing the Nymboida Power Station.” If the Commonwealth, New South Wales and Queensland governments were not interested, then they should leave the way open for private investors.<sup>150</sup> During 1949, Page succeeded in having councils form a ‘Federation of all Electrical Supply and Distribution Bodies of the North Coast

<sup>150</sup> Page to ‘Council Clerk’ (evidently an identical letter to all relevant councils), 14 July 1948, EPP, folder 2099.

and Tablelands' to "do everything" for electrification.<sup>151</sup> "A combined organisation, fully representative of the north", he said, could prevent the Commonwealth from using defence powers to by-pass local government, as it had with the Snowy.<sup>152</sup> Yet lack of local government unity was impeding progress: councils failed to grasp that investment ought to be "well ahead of immediate consumption demand" and that "the economics of water power development schemes tend to improve with larger schemes."<sup>153</sup>

Page continued his efforts at the national level. In 1949, he began openly criticising the Snowy, predicting that its steep slopes would cause such complications that the Clarence or even the Burdekin would be quicker to start generating power.<sup>154</sup> Page also continued to harry the Department of Post-War Reconstruction to the point that its Director of Regional Development proposed formally asking him to desist from public statements suggesting the Commonwealth was an active participant in the Technical Committee.<sup>155</sup> The Director-General of the Department, now Allen Brown, commented that New South Wales "has never appeared to be over-enthusiastic about pressing on with the investigations", especially as much of the project's benefit would go to Queensland. Another member of the Department concluded that there was an assured market only for 50,000 kW for Queensland and about 5,000-10,000 kW for northern New South Wales, well short of Page's claimed 125,000 kW.<sup>156</sup> The President of the Institution of Engineers assailed misconceptions about the TVA and the availability of water in Australia as the ideas of "ill-informed visionaries."<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> 'Northern Rivers Association of Municipalities & Shires Minutes of Conference Held at Lismore on Friday the 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1949, to Discuss and Consider Means of Expediting Completion of Survey, Investigation and Design of Proposed Clarence Gorge Hydro-Electric Scheme', EPP, folder 2099.

<sup>152</sup> See 'Statement by Sir Earle Page at Conference of North Coast Local Governing Bodies Held at Lismore 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1949,' EPP, folder 2102.

<sup>153</sup> Statement by Page, 24 April 1949, EPP, folder 2083.

<sup>154</sup> Statement by Page, 1 July 1949, reported in the Canberra Letter of The Associated Chambers of Manufacturers of Australia, EPP, folder 401.

<sup>155</sup> C.R. Lambert, minute of 6 May 1949, NAA, A9816, 1944/487 Part 1, *op. cit.* On Commonwealth inquiries with NSW, see for example Premier McGirr to Chifley of 24 November 1949, NAA, A9816, 1944/487 Part 2, *op. cit.*

<sup>156</sup> A.S. Brown, minute 'Clarence River Gorge Hydro-Electric Scheme' of 3 June 1949, NAA, A461, AK 423/1/1 *op. cit.*; T. Langford-Smith, 26 May 1949, *ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> William Nimmo in the *Journal of the Institution of Engineers, Australia*, no. 3, 1949, p. 29, copy in EPP, folder 1758.

Amidst this widespread scepticism and state government indifference, the fact that the Chifley government never decisively rejected The Gorge proposal constitutes a success of sorts for Page. The Prime Minister continued to correspond with him well into 1949, reminding Page that state government support was essential and also asking New South Wales about the progress of the Technical Committee.<sup>158</sup> As late as July 1949 the Director-General of Post-War Reconstruction wrote to his counterpart at Works and Housing recounting how earlier Commonwealth interest in the Clarence had been dampened by preference for the Snowy and “the usual Treasury influence.” He suggested it be revived, partly as it might produce far more power than even Page thought and as water power was “so limited in Australia we should be concerned to see that the maximum use is made of it.”<sup>159</sup> This led to a one week field study in August 1949 by a Works and Housing engineer who, despite having been accompanied by Page throughout, produced another inconclusive report duly noting the Clarence’s “very large power potential” and calling for further investigation.<sup>160</sup>

Page’s doggedness in promoting the Clarence reflects the difficulties he faced in a policy climate that favoured so many precepts he had long nurtured but in political circumstances that stood in the way of the major role he craved. He was pushed out to the margins by the irresistible pressures of party politics, a changed policy-making culture and a growing isolation from colleagues in conservative politics that had been discernable in the 1930s and became more obvious post-war. Yet he remained the most outspoken non-Labor advocate of the possibilities of post-war reconstruction and of the spatial and rural-orientated perspectives he had long added to so many issues. His lobbying for causes by whatever means came to hand – via state governments, the press, intellectual policy groups and directly to federal ministers – gave him a continued major public and political profile. Although unable directly to determine policy, his tireless efforts to guide post-war reconstruction’s engagement with federalism, regionalism, education and particularly

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<sup>158</sup> Chifley to Page, 24 June 1949 and 18 July 1949, EPP, folder 2087.

<sup>159</sup> A.S. Brown to L.F. Loder, 1 July 1949, NAA, A9816, 1944/487 Part 2, Clarence River Hydro-electric Scheme by Sir Earle Page Part 2.

<sup>160</sup> Report by E.F. Rowntree, finalised October 1949, copy at EPP, folder 1077.

hydroelectricity marked his distinctiveness and could at times still induce governments to respond to such sheer persistence. At the end of the 1940s, and of the life of the federal Labor government, Page remained undeterred and looked forward to the advent of a new conservative regime as a chance to restore his own fortunes and advance those of his country.

## **CHAPTER 8 – PAGE INDEFATIGABLE: HIS LAST YEARS IN PUBLIC LIFE**

When Page became Minister for Health in the second Menzies government, he saw himself as also becoming its leading advocate of developmentalism. In practice, he struggled to exert influence in a political environment that continued to evolve in ways he found uncongenial. Signs of the difficulties he would face were evident well before the government's election in December 1949. The alliance between the Country Party and the new Liberal Party differed from coalitions Page had previously experienced, and a highly charged political contest between public sector-led development and private enterprise left less space for his brand of ambitious developmentalism.

Relations between the two conservative parties had reached a low point during the 1943 federal election campaign, when Menzies disowned part of the Joint Opposition policy speech delivered by Fadden as Opposition Leader. But the following year, after resuming the leadership of the UAP, Menzies invited the Country Party to attend the talks that led to the formation of the new Liberal Party, raising the possibility of merger.<sup>1</sup> A merger did not eventuate, but collaboration between the two parties grew as each saw the other as an increasingly likely partner in a future coalition.<sup>2</sup>

Page intervened strongly and early when the Country Party resumed its internal debate on coalition, a clear sign that he was hoping to again play a major role in government. As Australian Country Party Association chair he assured his Liberal counterpart in January 1946 that the Country Party would collaborate in “securing the maximum goodwill between the parties,” especially by managing how they contested seats.<sup>3</sup> The parties co-operated informally at the September 1946 federal election but their respective leaders still delivered separate policy speeches, with the result that Fadden was seen to be

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Costar, ‘The Politics of Coalition’, in Prasser *et al.*, pp. 94-5.

<sup>2</sup> Casey as President of the Liberal Party over 1947-9 had doubts about amalgamation. The issue was complicated by proposals of varying degrees of good-will put forth at the state level, especially in New South Wales; see Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 275, and Ian Hancock, *National and Permanent?: The Federal Organisation of the Liberal Party of Australia 1944-1965*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 2000, pp. 78-80.

<sup>3</sup> Ellis, *ibid.*, p. 266. The Liberal Party president concerned was T.M. Ritchie.

outbidding the Liberals on tax cuts. Resumption of a coalition became an even higher priority after the unexpectedly severe loss at this election, leading the two parties to form a Joint Opposition Executive to guide policy and tactics.<sup>4</sup>

Page had temporary success during this immediate post-war period in injecting his ideas into the federal Country Party's policy commitments. Fadden's 1946 policy speech included some ambitious developmentalist concepts that Page had long advocated – a National Development and Defence Council, set prices for primary products, a flat national electricity rate, and inviting the chair of the TVA to visit to advise on the Clarence, the Snowy, the Murray Valley and even the Bradfield Plan to irrigate the interior.<sup>5</sup> These promises were made from the freedom of Opposition: their expansiveness is suggestive of a rhetorical riposte to the Chifley government's avowed nation-building agenda.

Nor did they last. By 1948 Page felt compelled to produce his own press release on 'The Need of a Strong, Vigorous and Numerous Country Party' in an attempt to reaffirm the Party's commitment to decentralisation.<sup>6</sup> Country Party-Liberal relations continued to improve over 1948-49, despite lingering discord at state level over competition for lower house seats.<sup>7</sup> At a January 1949 meeting to plan for the forthcoming election, the federal Country Party proposed an electoral pact with the Liberals and offered to confer on policy.<sup>8</sup> Page was heartened by the revival of a coalition but also faced a shift in public opinion against government-led planning, not a good sign for this inveterate planner. The public increasingly wanted to be rid of irksome wartime controls and the Cold War context added unsavoury connotations to government intervention. "The word 'plan' was a dirty word then" recalled the political journalist Frank Chamberlain.<sup>9</sup> This had been signalled as early as 1944 by

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<sup>4</sup> Ian Hancock, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-8.

<sup>5</sup> The text of this speech of 3 September 1946 is at EPP, folder 2618. The TVA Chair, David Lilienthal, appears not to have visited Australia.

<sup>6</sup> 'The Need of a Strong, Vigorous and Numerous Country Party', EPP, folder 1994 (i). Undated, but data used suggests 1948 or 1949.

<sup>7</sup> Ian Hancock, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-5.

<sup>8</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

<sup>9</sup> National Library of Australia Oral History Section, Recorded Interview with Frank Chamberlain, interviewer Mel Pratt, TRC 121/39, recorded 4 August 1972 and 19 January 1973, FC:1:2/3.

the defeat of the post-war reconstruction referendum and was underscored by the even heavier defeat of the May 1948 referendum on Commonwealth control of rents and prices, conducted in the shadow of the Chifley government's attempts to nationalise the private banks. Debate on the role of the state helped give the new Liberal Party a strong platform based on a commitment to individualism and private enterprise, tempered by its qualified acceptance of a place for government in economic management and social welfare. The federal Country Party agreed: at the same January 1949 meeting it declared that "to defeat communism, to preserve freedom in Australia and the driving force of individual initiative, it is most important to remove the Chifley socialistic government from power."<sup>10</sup>

Improving relations between the Liberals and the Country Party imposed disciplines that left less space for Page's vision. For the December 1949 election, Menzies and Fadden affirmed a renewed coalition by delivering a combined Opposition policy speech. Their "joint policy" covered the banning of the Communist Party, combatting industrial unrest, the repeal of bank nationalisation, a new national health scheme, stabilisation schemes for the wheat and dairy industries, and the raising of loans to be managed by what became the Department of National Development.<sup>11</sup> In his own campaign speeches Fadden now gave priority to conventional priorities of country roads, stabilisation of rural industries and an end to rationing – not planning or overtures to the TVA. He was especially vocal on petrol rationing, which the government had reintroduced to help conserve the sterling bloc's pool of US dollars – "empty out the Chifley socialists and fill the bowsers."<sup>12</sup>

Page did not play a major national role in the 1949 campaign. His foremost contributions were attacks on the Chifley government's plans for comprehensive medical and pharmaceutical benefits schemes. A High Court decision striking down compulsory clauses in its legislation on pharmaceutical benefits opened the way, said Page, for a "sane approach" based on the willing

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<sup>10</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 271-2.

<sup>12</sup> Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, *op. cit.*, p. 435; quote from Arklay, *Arthur Fadden*, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

co-operation of health providers.<sup>13</sup> Chifley attributed his unexpectedly severe loss in the election – the ALP won just 47 seats in an enlarged House of Representatives of 121 members – to public resentment of petrol rationing and bank nationalisation. Page's primary vote in his seat of Cowper shot up to its post-war peak of nearly 62 per cent.

The eternally optimistic Page welcomed the defeat of the Chifley government not merely as a party political triumph. After the baffling frustrations of post-war reconstruction under Chifley, Dedman and Coombs, he was again a Commonwealth minister in a government with a commitment to developmentalism. One of its first significant acts was to create a new portfolio of National Development, with Page's old friend Richard Casey as minister. He even saw the election as offering hope at last for The Gorge project.<sup>14</sup> But in practice, Page was only a nominal insider in the new government and over the next six years failed to spark a resurgence of his style of developmentalism. Menzies' political dominance from 1949 was alone sufficient to constrict Page's influence beyond his portfolio. The government did engage with issues of interest to Page, notably planning, power generation and higher education. But the nation-changing goals of decentralisation, regionalism and hydroelectricity that Page wanted these to ultimately address diverged too much from the government's more immediate objectives for him to greatly influence its policy mainstream.

The 1949 election was also challenging for Page by marking a major generational change in parliamentary membership. It is widely appreciated that this was so for the Liberal Party, with the average age of its 38 first-timers in the House of Representatives (out of a total of 55 Liberal MPs) being a comparatively youthful 43. Most were imbued with a conscious sense of having been elected at a pivotal time to oppose socialism.<sup>15</sup> Less widely known is that there was also an influx of new Country Party MPs. Of the

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<sup>13</sup> Page's comments as reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 8 October 1949, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> See for example his articles on this in the *Daily Examiner* of 29 October 1949, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ian Hancock, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-7.

Party's 19 members in the House, 8 were entirely new to parliament.<sup>16</sup> Page, approaching 70 years of age when the election was held, was the only survivor from the Bruce-Page days: no doubt he took solace from David Drummond's transfer to federal politics as member for New England. Page's views on Australian development were to diverge more than ever from all but a few of his party colleagues.

### **Page returns to government: success in the health portfolio but planning falters**

Robert Menzies did not incur lasting damage from Page's 1939 attack. Ten years later he returned to government at the head of a revitalised new party with a clearer philosophy and stronger national organisation than its UAP predecessor. As Menzies accepted an important role for government in both economy and society, provided this "seemed to us to be the best answer to a practical problem", the new Prime Minister upheld the Snowy Scheme, social welfare, increased public funding of universities and the policy-advising role of the public service. But this was within a wider context in which, as he reflected towards the end of his reign, his government's "first impulse" was "always to seek the private enterprise answer, to help the individual to help himself, to create a climate, economic, social, industrial, favourable to his activity and growth."<sup>17</sup>

Helping to consolidate this was a significant intellectual and governmental shift during the early 1950s from the social-democratic Keynesianism of the Chifley era to a more technocratic Keynesianism. Under the latter, "maintaining continuous economic growth became the new goal of economic management, which was redefined as a matter for bureaucratic administration based on economic 'science' rather than political contest." Unexpectedly strong private sector demand had stabilised the economy at full employment, and so "the idea of planning, of setting social goals and directing the economy accordingly, had

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<sup>16</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, pp. 281-2.

<sup>17</sup> Menzies speaking to the Liberal Party Federal Council, 6 April 1964, quoted in Walter, *What Were They Thinking?*, *op. cit.*, pp. 207.

given way to the lessor aims of management.”<sup>18</sup> John Crawford, now Secretary of the Commonwealth Department of Commerce and Agriculture, encapsulated this major shift in a 1952 public lecture on agricultural policy. Crawford, who also now chaired the Standing Committee of the AAC and had the increasingly influential John McEwen as his minister, began by explaining that he would “not be concerned to examine in any detail the relation between agricultural policy objectives and programmes and wider objectives of economic and social policy for the economy as a whole.” Instead, “the 1952 policy is really one which makes enhanced agricultural production a matter of urgency because it is a principal means to the wider ends of national interest.”<sup>19</sup> Page found during this decade that such narrowing of perspective worked against willingness to indulge his developmentalist vision of the nation.

Menzies’ markedly improved relations with the Country Party did not extend personally to Page. Page’s role in the Cabinet remained strictly limited to his own portfolio. He was not, for example, part of a March 1952 meeting of senior ministers with the visiting president of the World Bank, Eugene Black, despite discussion of matters as dear to him as water and electrification.<sup>20</sup> His fraught relationships with Menzies and Fadden were not aided by a practice of peppering both with missives proposing new initiatives, only some of which concerned health policy. Menzies typically responded with icy formality.<sup>21</sup> Page had mentored the young Fadden in the 1930s, but did not remain close to him personally or politically. Fadden, habitually a hearty friend to all, as Treasurer took little interest in Page’s vision and schemes. He referred some of Page’s correspondence to his Departmental Secretary Roland Wilson who was, for example, dismissive of Page’s hope of attracting private investment to infrastructure projects.<sup>22</sup> Page’s public pronouncements on this elicited a livid

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Smyth, *Australian Social Policy: The Keynesian Chapter*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1994, pp. 4, 127.

<sup>19</sup> J.G. Crawford, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> See record of meeting of 12 March 1952, EPP, folder 2508. The Minister for Public Works, William Kent Hughes, raised during this meeting foreign investment in power projects.

<sup>21</sup> Such as a 1951 letter from Menzies to Page rejecting a proposal to implement the new medical benefits scheme at once as “half-cocked”; see EPP, folder 2366.

<sup>22</sup> See for example Page to Fadden and Menzies, 3 November 1955, EPP, folder 1750 (i). Page’s model for private investment in infrastructure involved granting a private corporation a franchise or charter to construct a dam at its own expense, after which it would reap revenues

telegram from Fadden in August 1956 – it was strictly a matter for the states, said the Treasurer.<sup>23</sup> Nor would relations have been improved by a *Daily Telegraph* editorial of the following year contrasting the “elder statesman” Page with “sit-on-your-hands” Fadden.<sup>24</sup> Page was trying to operate in political circumstances that relied more on cautious but assertive public service advisors than the rural activists and visionary industrialists with whom he empathised. Unintentionally, he became a contrarian in the government.

The nuances and ultimate objectives of economic policy of the 1950s had only a coincidental focus on elements of Page’s own agenda. His concepts of national development were not as central to the new government as he had initially hoped. Page nominally conformed to most precepts of the Menzies government, and drew on these opportunistically to provide new arguments for old ideas. He used the language of the Cold Warrior in linking the “the growing, sinister and secret influence of Communism” to the growth of cities.<sup>25</sup>

Economic policy early in these Menzies years was dominated by short-term goals, firstly by carrying out the promise to scale back government regulation and then by managing the inflation associated with the Korean War wool boom via the ‘Horror Budget’ of 1951-52. A 1953 Cabinet submission on Queensland proposals to develop the Burdekin River and Tully Falls showed no trace of Page’s electophilia in recommending Commonwealth support for their irrigation components but declaring their hydroelectric elements uneconomic.<sup>26</sup>

Ellis’s summary of what most exercised the wider Country Party in these years emphasises such issues as the appreciation of the pound, fiscal policy, responses to the wool boom, and tax averaging for primary producers prone to fluctuating incomes.<sup>27</sup> State governments gave priority to managing the

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for a set period before the facility would “become the property of the Authority giving the charter, debt free and fully functioning.” See ‘Local Government Enquiry Commencing at Grafton on 10<sup>th</sup> September 1956, on Proposed Redivision of Local Government Boundaries – Evidence of Sir Earle Page, MP’, EPP, folder 1798, pp. 7-8.

<sup>23</sup> Telegram Fadden to Page, 1 August 1956, EPP, folder 2049. Page continued to seek private investment in the Clarence.

<sup>24</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 31 July 1956.

<sup>25</sup> ‘The Need of a Strong, Vigorous and Numerous Country Party’, *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> See EPP, folder 2509.

<sup>27</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, pp. 285-91.

pressures that urban growth imposed on education, transport and other services. Page's determination to improve rural living standards did not extend to applauding the consumerism that had burst forth from the pent-up demand of the war years and manifested itself in new household products and climbing rates of car and home ownership. Generally stable economic growth of over 4 per cent per annum during the 1950s made developmentalism, Page-style, seem less urgent.<sup>28</sup> Menzies' chapter on development policy in his second volume of memoirs, prosaically entitled 'Stability, Capital and Development', limits itself to the wool boom, overseas investment and new mining ventures in the continent's far northwest.<sup>29</sup>



*Figure 10: the new Menzies Ministry 1949, with Earle Page as Minister for Health. Page is standing immediately behind Governor-General William McKell, former Premier of New South Wales and TVA sceptic. Richard Casey is standing third from left, Enid Lyons sixth from left and John McEwen second from the right. Arthur Fadden is seated in the front row to the immediate right of McKell. (NAA M4297, 10).*

Page in this second Menzies government is today best known for his role as Health Minister in creating Australia's first national public health benefits scheme. His return to this portfolio (which he had previously held in 1937-38) elicited little public surprise: the *Sydney Morning Herald* editorialised that his "personal claims to the portfolio can hardly be contested."<sup>30</sup> The offer of Health to Page suggests that Menzies judged that his personal standing in the medical fraternity would be valuable in negotiating a scheme acceptable to the British Medical Association (Australia), the profession's peak body.

<sup>28</sup> Growth figure from Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Menzies, *The Measure of the Years*, Cassell, London, 1970, pp. 98-108.

<sup>30</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 December 1949, p. 2.

When Page assumed the Health portfolio, the public funding of medical services already had a long history as an unresolved issue. As long before as 1925-6, the Bruce-Page government's Royal Commission on Health had failed to lead to a public health scheme. The Curtin and Chifley governments over 1944-49 pursued a non-contributory scheme that took inspiration from Britain's National Health Service and would have imposed a high degree of public control over health services. Extended attempts to negotiate an agreement with the BMA foundered over doctors' insistence on freedom to set their own fees. Menzies gave Page, himself a BMA member with a long personal history of resisting salaried medicine, a free hand in negotiations. Amidst the challenges posed by the political environment of these years, this freedom played to Page's strengths of empathy with his original profession and tenacity in negotiation. Political contemporaries soon found that the new Health Minister could still be a capable political operator. Paul Hasluck, a fellow minister, recalled him as a "benign and shrewd old fox."<sup>31</sup> Page seized the opportunity with typical alacrity, in what Ellis later described as "a series of *coups d'état*."<sup>32</sup>

Page commenced with telegraphed overtures to the BMA and other professional associations on the very day he was sworn in. He produced a Cabinet submission as early as 9 January 1950 proposing a program to "help those who helped themselves" and "strengthen the working of existing, voluntary insurance organisations" that would "provide a real nursery for democracy."<sup>33</sup> Despite considerable difficulties, Page showed skill and creativity as he put a scheme into place step by step over 1950-53, carefully designed around what the BMA would accept. This was quite unlike the comprehensive national health service the Chifley government had tried to impose over the objections of the medical profession, but rather was based on taxpayer-funded subsidisation of voluntary private insurance without the direct regulation of doctors' fees. Only pensioners would receive fully free medical

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<sup>31</sup> Paul Hasluck, *The Chance of Politics*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1997, p. 41.

<sup>32</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

<sup>33</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 430-1.

services.<sup>34</sup> Even Menzies later described Page's speech introducing the *National Health Act* in 1953 as "an extraordinarily able and well-informed exposition of our philosophic approach" that "the individual doctor-patient relationship should be preserved and the disadvantages of a fully nationalized and Government-conducted scheme averted." Menzies declared health policy "one of the high spots of my period as Prime Minister."<sup>35</sup>

Although Page remained proud of what is widely seen as one of his foremost achievements, in long, discursive speeches reviewing his career he portrayed his public health scheme as just one success alongside an array of developmentalist initiatives. Page still hankered for a major say in development policies. As he told the Cowper Federal Electorate Council in November 1956, ten months after finally retiring from the frontbench, "my special position and knowledge made me of more value outside the Cabinet, although always ready and willing and available to give advice when needed."<sup>36</sup> Even from the margins of political power, Page worked hard to draw the Menzies government into considering his ideas.

One example is national economic planning. In the early 1950s, Page continued to bemoan the abolition of the DMC. He wrote to Bruce that ever

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<sup>34</sup> This subsidization was provided on a claims basis as a refund for part of actual expenditure by patients for approved health care, not a more general subsidization of private health insurance providers. The scheme also involved a free list of certain essential drugs, a means-tested pensioners' list for all drugs and increased Commonwealth grants to hospitals. The fullest account of early public health insurance in Australia is Gillespie's *The Price of Health: Australian Governments and Medical Politics 1910-1960*, *op. cit.* Although the Page scheme (as it is sometimes called) was the forerunner of subsequent public health benefits schemes, Gillespie is critical of Page's efforts as "a pragmatic, unplanned set of benefit programmes cobbled together in the face of intense suspicion from the BMA", *op. cit.*, p. 278. Other critics felt it was insufficiently targeted to the lowest income groups; see for example Gwen Gray, 'Social Policy' in Prasser *et al.*, p. 217. Page's wider views may have influenced this pioneering program, in that he wanted its administration highly decentralised. In a 1950 speech he told state Health Ministers he would leave management of national health policy to existing state machinery and that "there should be an even further decentralisation of authority and administration"; 15 August 1950, EPP, folder 2501. In a letter of 9 March that year to Bruce, he expressed a fear that a more generous scheme would degrade community independence, resulting in "cynical indifference"; EPP, folder 1821.

<sup>35</sup> Menzies, *The Measure of the Years*, *op. cit.*, pp. 120, 123.

<sup>36</sup> Speech by Page to Cowper Federal Electorate Council, 9 November 1956, EPP, folder 1805. For an example of praise of the scheme, see comments by Colin A. Hughes describing this "comprehensive health scheme" as "the last major project" of Page's "inventive brain" in *Mr Prime Minister: Australian Prime Ministers 1901-1972*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1976, p. 101.

since there had been “no fact-finding nor comprehensive planning organisation in Australia adequate to deal with the problems facing us”, and pondered “the folly of Scullin’s destruction of the organisation that was co-ordinating Federal and state policy as regards development and collecting invaluable data.”<sup>37</sup> Despite public disdain, planning remained a sufficiently persistent concept amongst policy-makers to nominally survive the advent of the second Menzies government. Although Menzies abolished the Department of Post-War Reconstruction, many of its functions were shifted to other departments, with the Industrial Development and Regional Resources Divisions going to the newly created Department of National Development.<sup>38</sup> This new agency raised Page’s hopes. His sense of personal ownership of planning remained so strong that he entered the new government telling Casey as the Minister for National Development how to organise his department so as to hoist development and planning atop the government’s agenda.

Page’s relationship with Casey was important to him. They had worked together on the National Council proposal in 1938-39 and shared an interest in the TVA.<sup>39</sup> Days after the 1949 election, Ulrich Ellis produced a written proposal, almost certainly in consultation with Page, entitled ‘A General Approach to the Organisation of a National Development Scheme.’ This effectively proposed reviving the National Council concept. It called for a hierarchy of planning agencies headed by a National Development Council supported by advisers from industry, state councils and regional or zone councils.<sup>40</sup> Both Page and Casey as new ministers were provided with a draft Cabinet paper on the Department of National Development prepared by the Chair of the Public Service Commission, W.E. Dunk. This recommended very wide policy responsibilities for the Department, including closer settlement, transport, water conservation, regional development, secondary industry and minerals. It would survey, plan and then enter into implementation agreements

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<sup>37</sup> Page to Bruce, 9 March 1950 and 11 July 1951, EPP, folder 1821.

<sup>38</sup> Macintyre, *Australia’s Boldest Experiment*, *op. cit.*, p. 465.

<sup>39</sup> See Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 236; and Walter in Head and Walter, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

<sup>40</sup> Ellis, ‘A General Approach to the Organisation of a National Development Scheme,’ 24 December 1949, EPP, folder 2076.

with state governments, also reminiscent of what Page had previously sought.<sup>41</sup>

Page himself wrote to Casey at length about the Department in terms that recycled ideas from 1938-39. He wanted a powerful central agency that guided the rest of government and advanced his own agenda – “the immediate objective of the Department of Development [*sic*] must be to provide a plan to halt the appalling drift from the countryside.”<sup>42</sup> It should be headed by someone the calibre of Essington Lewis, Tim Clapp or Charles Kemp. Like Dunk, he foresaw it co-ordinating policy with the states, including by surveying national resources and in promoting rural electrification. It would set long-term output targets for such key industries as power, coal and steel. New sectoral planning authorities such as a Joint Coal Board would bring governments together to “carry out big schemes”, while the Tariff Board extended assistance to industries selected by the Department.<sup>43</sup>

In practice, however, the Department of National Development was subject to complaints from state governments and soon lost staff and powers in a government elsewhere focused.<sup>44</sup> Casey moved on to the External Affairs portfolio in 1951, but maintained a personal interest in development. In June 1952 he suggested to Cabinet a near-revival of Page’s 1938-39 proposal – “consideration should be given as to what pressure can be brought to bear in the Loan Council on the state governments, to oblige them to agree to the setting up of a non-political body to screen and to create a list of priorities in respect of state, semi-governmental and local governing body works.”<sup>45</sup> The two corresponded throughout the 1950s, marking Casey as perhaps the only

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<sup>41</sup> Draft Cabinet paper, with covering letter by W.E. Dunk, 12 January 1950 (earlier draft dated 27 December 1949), EPP, folder 2074.

<sup>42</sup> Page to Casey, 9 January 1950, EPP, folder 2074.

<sup>43</sup> Undated document, ‘Functions of the Department of Development’, EPP, folder 2322.

<sup>44</sup> A.J. Davies, ‘National Development Under Australian Federalism: Politics or Economics’, a paper presented to the Australasian Political Science Association conference, August 1965; A.J. Davies ‘National Development’, *Australian Quarterly*, *op. cit.*; and W.J. Hudson, *Casey*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1986, pp. 208-11. The Department was also weakened by the transfer in 1950 of the Economic Policy Division of the old Department of Post-War Reconstruction to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet; see David Lee, ‘Cabinet’ in Prasser *et al.* p. 127; and also David Lowe, ‘Menzies’ National Security State, 1950-53’, in Frank Cain (ed.), *Menzies in War and Peace*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1997.

<sup>45</sup> Submission by Casey to Cabinet, 24 June 1952, EPP, folder 2508.

minister of the time to engage gladly with Page beyond his responsibilities as Health Minister. It was significant for Page that Casey was not a major influence in Menzies' Cabinet, and so was more friend and sounding-board than effective ally.<sup>46</sup>

Other recurrences of political interest in planning also bore similarities to Page's National Council, but sometimes incorporated an emphasis on defence planning that overshadowed traces of his developmentalist vision. A National Security Resources Board modelled on an American agency of the same name was established late in 1950 as a response to the Korean War. It was chaired by Menzies himself and had a mixed mandate to advise on the "balanced allocation of the nation's resources as between defence, development, export production and the maintenance of the civilian economy." Despite Casey's urging, it never attained an executive role before ceasing to function three years later.<sup>47</sup> The Country Party's November 1953 Federal Platform and Policy called for "Commonwealth-state machinery to determine the priority" of developmental projects.<sup>48</sup> In May 1954 Menzies proposed in his election policy speech a National Development Commission as "a small advisory body of highly expert persons" which would report to the Commonwealth and the states, and depoliticise development policy – "in the absence of such a body, Australian development may be actually hindered by election promises about specific local projects, made without regard to any Australian pattern."<sup>49</sup> The Commission was not formed as the states declined to be involved.<sup>50</sup> Such attempts to institute planning in whatever muted form were also echoes of a receding sense that the nation was underperforming, and perhaps also owed

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<sup>46</sup> "Casey was ineffective in Cabinet. I doubt whether there any other minister during the time he was in Cabinet with me who lost so many submissions"; Hasluck, *The Chance of Politics*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

<sup>47</sup> Executive Member of the Board, economist E.R. Walker, quoted in Davies, 'National Development', *Australian Quarterly*, *op. cit.*, p. 49; and in 'National Development Under Australian Federalism', *op. cit.*, pp. 19-26. See also Lee in Prasser, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-30; and Heather Curtis, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-3.

<sup>48</sup> Earle Page Papers, UNE Archives, A0180, box 4, folder 41 (a).

<sup>49</sup> Menzies quoted in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 May 1954, p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Davies, 'National Development', *Australian Quarterly*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

something to the interest of economic and intellectual figures in the indicative planning then popular in western Europe.<sup>51</sup>

The planning concept that Page had long nurtured still lingered, but wider political opinion held that the economy was doing well enough without comprehensive guidance from government. As its most important political advocate in the 1950s, he helped to keep the concept under government consideration, albeit intermittently. Page was far from being Australia's only advocate of planning. S.J. Butlin wrote in 1955 that "part of the general thinking of all Australians on economic affairs is a not very coherent prejudice in favour of an increase in total "production", specially the introduction of new industries, coupled with the assumption that the natural way to promote such new industries is government aid."<sup>52</sup> But no other Australian federal politician of senior standing had pursued economy-wide planning with anything like Page's tenacity or scale of conception.

Page's lack of traction on such nation-changing issues as planning was also attributable to his increasing distance from the new generation of Country Party MPs. Aitkin later wrote of a fundamental change in the organisation of the Country Party from its founding as "little more than an extra-parliamentary committee formed by two primary producer organisations" into a post-war "mass political party of familiar type."<sup>53</sup> The Country Party's policy ambitions also changed, narrowing as the very worst privations of rural life were eased by such improved amenities as the road, phone and radio services that Page had championed. Mainstream rural politics gradually hardened into a focus on managing such priorities as price stabilisation schemes for wheat, dairy, dried

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<sup>51</sup> On Australian interest in planning in the latter 1950s, see the memoirs of the Canberra-based economist Heinz Arndt, *A Course Through Life: Memoirs of an Australian Economist*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1985, pp. 49-50; and Peter Coleman, Selwyn Cornish and Peter Drake, *Arndt's Story: The Life of an Australian Economist*, ANU E Press and Asia Pacific Press, Canberra, 2007, pp. 201-2. Note also comments by John Crawford at the end of the decade that "we are all planners now" but which reflected a very expansive conception of planning, including by government establishing "shared belief" in attainable objectives; quoted in Smyth, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

<sup>52</sup> S.J. Butlin, *War Economy 1939-1942*, a volume in the official history of Australia in the War of 1939-1945, Series 4 Civil, volume 3, Canberra, Australian War Memorial, 1955, p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales*, *op. cit.*, p. 21. This reference was primarily to the New South Wales Country Party; hence the two organisations are the FSA of New South Wales and the Graziers' Association of New South Wales.

fruits, cotton and tobacco, tax concessions for new investment, and subsidies on inputs.<sup>54</sup> This overtook the sense of exclusion that had helped motivate the pre-war Country Party to now give it a strong stake in extracting benefits from systems embedded into government practice. Geoffrey Blainey adds that rural protest declined after 1945 due to generally good weather and high prices: “in the Menzies years the big country towns oozed prosperity” and “the Australian countryside lived on clover.”<sup>55</sup> This is an overstatement – the Korean War wool boom did not last and some rural industries sought protection from imports – but it remains that there was far less sense of rural crisis than in the inter-war years. Page seemed a man out of time. Australia was a more settled and prosperous nation, and his style of developmentalism became ill-fitted to a party increasingly sceptical of grand visions.

There is no better illustration of Page’s divergence from the rest of the Country Party than the contrasting world views presented in his speech of 28 July 1956 to its Executive Council in Perth and that on the same day in the same city by McEwen as Minister for Trade to the annual general meeting of the Country Party of Western Australia. Page called for a national population of 30 million, new states and the emulation of the development of the US, especially decentralisation, mass migration, foreign capital and hydroelectricity. A National Council of Defence and Development was needed to “determine a pattern of development taking into account the economic and strategy factors associated with the size and locations of towns and cities.” McEwen’s speech reported on recent economic growth, factory construction, exports and how stable commodity prices could encourage development in South East Asia. His primary goal was stated simply and bluntly as “fast and balanced growth.”<sup>56</sup> Page’s post-war career draws out such changes in developmentalist thought.

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<sup>54</sup> Lloyd in Williams provides a succinct summary of agricultural policy in the 1950s, *op. cit.*, pp. 362-3. He adds that in 1952 the Commonwealth government with AAC endorsement announced production targets for 1957-58, “Australian agriculture’s nearest approach in peacetime to indicative planning.”

<sup>55</sup> Geoffrey Blainey, *This Land is All Horizons: Australian Fears and Visions*, Boyer Lectures 2001, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney, 2001, pp. 37-8. Sinclair attributes much of the post-war upturn in the rural economy to improvements in land use management and technology; see Sinclair, *The Process of Economic Development in Australia*, *op. cit.*, pp. 212-3.

<sup>56</sup> Transcripts of both speeches are in the National Party Papers, NLA, MS 7507, series 1, box 1.

In the 1950s, developmentalism based on rural development was both challenged and supplemented by the nurturing of manufacturing (including outside the major cities) using protection from import competition, tax concessions and subsidised energy. Major enthusiasts for this approach included not only McEwen but also such prominent figures as Premier Thomas Playford of South Australia.<sup>57</sup> Development led by mining also began to gain prominence during the 1950s and 1960s, especially in Western Australia.<sup>58</sup>

### **Page's persistence: higher education, new states and hydroelectricity**

One of the main fields where Page tried to influence the agenda of the second Menzies government outside his health portfolio was higher education. Unlike planning, the development of universities had the government's committed attention, but Page's interventions served more to illustrate how different his views were. They also marked him as one of the few senior political figures – including Menzies himself – who looked beyond the vocational dimension of universities to their role in shaping society. Page's longstanding involvement with the New England University College gave him a firm platform for public pronouncements. This institution finally became the fully autonomous University of New England in 1954 with Page installed as its first Chancellor, a personal career highlight. At the 1956 speech to a dinner marking his retirement from the ministry he described providing “equal opportunities to the country student” as one of his major lifetime objectives.<sup>59</sup>

In retirement, Menzies recalled that during these years “the numbers of young men and women anxious to avail themselves of university training had increased beyond all anticipation.”<sup>60</sup> Student enrolments almost doubled

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<sup>57</sup> See David C. Rich, ‘Tom’s Vision?’ in Bernard O’Neil, Judith Raftery and Kerrie Round (eds.), *Playford’s South Australia: Essays on the History of South Australia, 1933-1968*, Association of Professional Historians Inc., Adelaide, 1996, pp. 91-116.

<sup>58</sup> Lenore Layman, ‘Development Ideology in Western Australia 1933-1965’, *Historical Studies*, vol. 20, no. 79, October 1982, pp. 234-260. Layman is one of the few Australian historians to approach developmentalism as an ideology; she charted a shift in Western Australian developmentalism from fostering manufacturing to the use of state incentives to attract private investment for the exploitation of mineral resources.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Australian Country Party Complimentary Dinner to Sir Earle Page’, *op. cit.*

<sup>60</sup> Menzies, *The Measure of the Years*, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

between 1945 and 1956 to reach 31,000.<sup>61</sup> Most political and educational commentators did not envisage a total re-engineering of universities but simply supported their expansion to cope with this burgeoning demand. Following promoting from the Vice-Chancellors of Australia's then nine universities, Menzies agreed that there should be a more thorough inquiry into their needs than hitherto, and in December 1956 appointed the Murray Committee on Australian Universities. Although Page's hope of reconfiguring higher education according to his ideas on decentralisation and the scale of institutions distanced him from the educational mainstream, his interest in education was sufficiently appreciated to earn him such invitations as to address the 1950 Canberra University College commencement ceremony on 'The Value of Decentralisation of University Education.' His public statements of this time are some of his most strident attacks on city life and among the most passionate declarations of the importance of higher education by any Australian politician.

For Page, the central problem was not that existing universities were too small, but rather that they were too large to respond to rising demand. Their scale already imposed problems of the co-ordination of research and teaching which would only worsen should they continue to grow. Page concluded that "very large Universities in capital cities can now do little more than provide technical or professional vocational training." To "train good citizens in the true liberal tradition as well as good technicians" required small institutions of about 300 to 750 students offering residential and tutorial-based learning. The result would make each student "an active partner in a teacher-learner association rather than a passive recipient of pre-digested knowledge."<sup>62</sup>

Such small universities were not feasible in big cities with their high costs and petty distractions "so great that it would be very difficult to build up a corporate spirit upon which maximum success would depend." So Page called for "a number of small universities placed at strategic points throughout the country

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<sup>61</sup> A.W. Martin, *Robert Menzies: A Life, Volume 2, 1944-78*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 1999, p. 397.

<sup>62</sup> 'Speech by Sir Earle Page at the Graduation Ceremony of the University of New England, Armidale, Saturday, 16th April, 1955, at 2.30 P.M.,' EPP, folder 2636.

districts.” These would be critically important in reversing population drift by conducting regional research and nurturing community leaders – “a united and properly balanced community must have available within itself all those factors which bind the region together and develop within it a community of interest.”<sup>63</sup> Ultimately, a national network of small universities would contribute to shaping the nation along Page’s favoured regionalised lines. The University of New England would serve “by example to inspire the launching of other similar enterprises in other parts of the Commonwealth to restore the balance in Australian development, to decentralise university education.”<sup>64</sup>

Page’s speeches on education contain some of his most metaphysical and hyperbolic comments on decentralisation. “Nature had taught the country dweller the need for balance” he said, and “if the machine is out of balance the harder it works, the sooner it destroys itself.” Restoring such balance was “my own lifetime ambition.”<sup>65</sup> He told the University of Queensland in May 1960 that its university college at Townsville would help “prevent the growth of the mind and culture of both teachers and students being overlaid by mercantile or industrial factors which may destroy them unwittingly like a child can be suffocated by its drunken parents in bed.”<sup>66</sup> Such statements reflect the depth of Page’s habitual drawing together of disparate concepts into a reinforcing whole – in this case, decentralisation, balance on a national scale, institutions small enough to nurture individuality and an exemplar institution to guide the entire nation.

Page’s promulgated views on education carried too much extraneous baggage to win wider acceptance during the post-war growth of universities. The Murray

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<sup>63</sup> Earle Page, *The Value of Decentralisation of University Education in Australia: Being an Address Delivered at the Twenty-first Annual Commencement Ceremony of the Canberra University College on 28th March, 1950*, Canberra University College, Canberra, 1950, pp. 6, 8, 10.

<sup>64</sup> ‘Speech by Sir Earle Page at the Graduation Ceremony of the University of New England, Armidale’, *op. cit.*

<sup>65</sup> Page official dinner speech of 4 August 1955 on the occasion of his ceremonial installation as Chancellor, transcript of speech and as reported in the *Daily Examiner*, 5 August 1955; and speech at official luncheon on the same date; both at EPP, folder 2321. His instalment as Chancellor provided a unique opportunity for Page to proselytize before an audience that included many Vice-Chancellors and government ministers.

<sup>66</sup> Speech to mark the jubilee of the University of Queensland, May 1960 (day not given), EPP, folder 2133.

Report pondered how universities could provide “a full and true education”, but reached conclusions that diverged from Page’s ideas in their orientation to meeting growing demand for workforce skills. It recommended concentrating future university expansion in population centres, with only passing reference to small rural universities. Its canvassing of university residences failed to incorporate Page’s ideas about tutorial-based education.<sup>67</sup> There were more influential individual players in the 1950s on university issues such as A.P. Rowe, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Adelaide, whose memoirs mention neither rural universities nor Page.<sup>68</sup> Although Page’s specific ideas were bypassed, A.W. Martin erred in stating that apart from Menzies it is “hard to think of another federal politician at the time – with the very important exception of H.V. Evatt – who more revered, understood and often in an old-fashioned way romanticised, the ideal of a university.”<sup>69</sup>

By contrast with his involvement in planning and higher education – two fields with some basis in the government’s policies – Page as Health Minister largely suspended his public campaigning on new states. As in the Bruce-Page days, it would have been difficult to reconcile such activity with his status as a Commonwealth minister. His public comments on this topic became sporadic, such as his pondering in 1951 “some biological reason” why cities over 50,000 cannot maintain themselves without absorbing rural migrants “into their vortex.”<sup>70</sup> Page’s absence from active campaigning is one reason why there was little effective political support for new states and decentralisation in the 1950s. Country Party and community interest dwindled: the Party’s 1953 platform made only vague references to new states, decentralisation and “local

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<sup>67</sup> *Report of the Committee on Australian Universities*, (the ‘Murray Committee’), Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1957, see pp. 8, 12, 39, 54-5, 89. The Committee noted the relatively good performance of residential students. Monash University’s first Chancellor said that Murray rejected Victoria’s second university as a decentralised, residential institution in favour of a Melbourne location; Robert Blackwood, *Monash University: The First Ten Years*, Hampden Hall, Melbourne, 1968, p. 9. Page did not give evidence before the Committee.

<sup>68</sup> A.W. Martin, ‘R.G. Menzies and the Murray Committee’, in *Ideas for Histories of Universities in Australia*, edited by F.B. Smith and P. Crichton, Division of Historical Studies, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra, 1990, p. 104; A. P. Rowe, *If the Gown Fits*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, 1960. Rowe was however sympathetic to students being in residence; *ibid.*, pp. 80-3.

<sup>69</sup> Martin, *ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>70</sup> Statement 5 January 1951, EPP, folder 1627.

control of local affairs.”<sup>71</sup> Governments were only politely sympathetic. In 1957 the Country Party Premier of Queensland, Frank Nicklin, declared himself willing to test public opinion formally on dividing the state should he receive sufficiently large petitions: that this offer came to nothing was often remarked upon by remaining new staters.<sup>72</sup> There was more interest in intellectual quarters. *Current Affairs Bulletin* devoted an issue to new states in 1950 and four years later the Institute of Public Affairs produced a booklet advocating a petition-referendum formula for their creation.<sup>73</sup>

Ulrich Ellis temporarily assumed Page’s role as the public face of new statism. From 1946 he effectively personally constituted the Canberra-based Office of Rural Research from which he issued a stream of publications before resigning in 1960 to concentrate on the New England separation campaign. Ellis was prominent at a major joint conference convened at Corowa in July-August 1951 of the New England New State Movement, the Murray Valley Development League and the Murrumbidgee Valley Water Users’ Association. Visible as Ellis was, there are signs that Page was an influence behind the scenes. In October 1955, for instance, Ellis sought Page’s comments concerning a draft bill on the division of assets and liabilities between parent states and their new state offspring.<sup>74</sup> A few stalwarts of the old Country Party-new state network remained active. Drummond now chaired the Australian Decentralisation and Development Committee (secretary, Ulrich Ellis) which lobbied Premiers and federal ministers on the outcomes of the Corowa conference.<sup>75</sup>

Page was far less inhibited in publicly promoting the Clarence hydroelectricity project, evidently judging that his role as local member made this compatible with his ministerial status. In the early 1950s the Clarence issue was driven by a series of expert reports. Repeatedly disappointed but never deterred, Page kept seeking one that delivered the conclusively positive findings he needed.

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<sup>71</sup> Country Party 1953 Platform, copy in EPP, folder 1685.

<sup>72</sup> From the account of the new state movement written by Thompson for Page, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>73</sup> *Current Affairs Bulletin*, ‘New States’, 28 August 1950; *Safeguard Your Rights by Review of the Constitution*, IPA New South Wales, Sydney, October 1954, p. 18.

<sup>74</sup> Ellis to Page, 14 October 1955, EPP, folder 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Such as a deputation to the Prime Minister in April 1952; see Ellis papers NLA, MS 1006, Box 22 series 7B, folder 99.

That these studies were undertaken at all owed much to his persistence. In 1951 the New South Wales government's Technical Committee, appointed following Page's post-war lobbying, finally recommended a dual purpose flood mitigation and hydroelectricity dam, and the fuller investigation of the wider Clarence catchment.<sup>76</sup> The New South Wales Director of Public Works, J.M. Main, much later wrote to Page criticising these recommendations as having been "of a preliminary nature particularly in regard to the economics of hydroelectric power generation."<sup>77</sup> Main himself chaired the most substantive of all the Clarence reports, the 1951-55 'Clarence Advisory Committee on the Development of the Resources of the Clarence Valley'. This report dismissed the Technical Committee's findings and recommended that state electricity authorities be left to make their own decisions in the wider context of thermal and Snowy Scheme developments.<sup>78</sup> As the decade dragged on with little to show, Page was by 1954 floating a much smaller proposal to further develop the Nymboida.<sup>79</sup>

It is remarkable that Page managed to keep hydroelectricity on the agenda of governments at all given the results of these studies and further shifts in professional interest towards nuclear and thermal power. The Snowy Scheme did not spark wider support for hydroelectricity. Even William Hudson, manager of the Snowy, publicly conceded that hydroelectricity was limited by geography and high initial capital costs.<sup>80</sup> Local government also began to have doubts. Joe Cahill, as New South Wales Minister for Local Government a longstanding Page target, claimed in January 1952 that the Clarence River County Council actually preferred a number of smaller schemes to The Gorge and pointed out that the state's Electricity Authority opposed reliance on

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<sup>76</sup> Extract from the Technical Committee report, EPP, folder 1798; this folder also has a copy of the 1951-5 report that summarises and critiques the Technical Committee.

<sup>77</sup> Main to Page, 25 October 1957, EPP, folder 2595.

<sup>78</sup> See copy of report in EPP, folder 2592.

<sup>79</sup> 'Abundant and Permanently Cheap Electricity for Progressive Northern Development' – a 'statement' by Page, no date but c. 1954, EPP, folder 2324.

<sup>80</sup> N.R. Wills (ed.), *Australia's Power Resources: Papers Read at the 1954 Winter Forum of the Victorian Group of the Australian Institute of Political Science*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1955, pp. 64-5. But Hudson was still a hydroelectricity enthusiast, where practical; see for example his foreword to C.H. Munro's *Australian Water Resources and their Development*, Angus and Robertson, Cremorne, 1974.

hydroelectricity given “the hydrological and field work which is required.”<sup>81</sup> Perhaps worst of all for Page, the Commonwealth Minister for National Development, Bill Spooner, estimated in 1955 that coal reserves in the three mainland eastern states would meet power requirements for the next fifty years.<sup>82</sup>

The British social historian Bill Luckin has concluded that the British Electrical Development Association was most successful when it appealed to wider rural sentiment by drawing on “existing cultural repertoires while simultaneously generating novel images of technological superiority, cultural modernity and near-universal access.”<sup>83</sup> There is some parallel here with Page's hydroelectric activism, which was limited by failure to attract the interest of his various allies on other causes, even the new staters. That Page never entirely swallowed his disappointment at the choice of the Snowy over the Clarence further isolated him as the former became a national showcase. His efforts on electrification also affirmed that his political influence remained greatest in local and federal government, not the state level which was responsible for most power projects. The locally-run Nymboida power station remained his foremost success.

### **Page resigns from the ministry to pursue his vision**

Page announced his resignation from the Menzies ministry immediately after the government was re-elected in December 1955. His last official policy initiative before retiring to the backbenches the following month was legislation to amend his *National Health Act* of 1953. In announcing his retirement, Page listed the issues he would henceforth pursue – water conservation, hydroelectricity, new states and decentralisation.<sup>84</sup> He also lamented that “the only way Federation can continue to exist is through a series of co-operative partners”; but that “city people don't know about the country.” Page now

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<sup>81</sup> Cahill to Page, 15 January 1956, EPP, folder 2056.

<sup>82</sup> W.H. Spooner, quoted in Alice Cawte, *Atomic Australia 1944-1990*, NSW University Press, Kensington, 1992, p. 103.

<sup>83</sup> Luckin, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in the *West Australian* of 13 December 1955, clipping at EPP, folder 1683.

thought that what the nation needed was “cities of 200,000 people every 50 miles throughout this country, not just a few monster cities on the coast”.<sup>85</sup>

As Page had expected in the immediate aftermath of the 1949 election, the second Menzies government presided over a nation undergoing rapid change – high population growth, a younger population, rising material affluence and greater cultural diversity than ever before. But not so foreseeable to him was that the 1950s would not be an era of major innovation in development policy. In the second half of the decade there was an emerging perception that the Menzies government was disengaged from many of the transformations over which it presided. This included articulate criticism of a seemingly unimaginative national leadership inspired by such figures as John Douglas Pringle, the British expatriate editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*.<sup>86</sup>

Page became the somewhat fortuitous beneficiary of this. Immediately he was free of the strictures of public office, Page campaigned as an effectively autonomous MP dedicated to realising what he saw as the missed opportunities of the post-war and Menzies eras. The reaction to his urging had two distinct dimensions. One suggests that political interest in interventionist-based national development was now at one of its lowest ebbs in twentieth-century Australian history.<sup>87</sup> But against this, there remained a distinct popular and cultural interest in grand visions that was reflected in press coverage lauding Page for presenting an appealing contrast as the elder statesman of national development. Page tapped into this.

Page resumed trying to persuade the Country Party to make a practical rather than nominal commitment to new states and other causes, and did not hesitate to berate the government of which he was nominally still a member. He spoke only occasionally in the House, but when he did it was often at length to

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<sup>85</sup> Quoted in the *Daily Telegraph*, 17 December 1955, clipping at EPP, folder 1683.

<sup>86</sup> John Douglas Pringle, *Australian Accent*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1978 (first published 1958); see also for example Geoffrey Bolton, ‘Two Pauline Versions,’ in Prasser *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 42. Menzies vigorously defended his domestic record, such as in his second volume of memoirs, *The Measure of the Years*, *op. cit.*

<sup>87</sup> See Lee in Prasser, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-9, for a summation of the essentially non-interventionist approach of the Menzies government to national development.

reassert an entire vision of the nation's future. A typical effort was his response to the 1957-58 budget. This speech ranged across northern development, regional self-government, public debt, the incidence of tuberculosis, mental health, decentralisation, foreign investment, new states, national productivity, the dairy industry, water use, marketing of Australian exports and hydroelectricity.<sup>88</sup> Page tied most of his late career ideas together more coherently when he spoke to the Australian Provincial Press Association Conference in October 1956 – the very same forum he had addressed in 1917. Nearly four decades on, his goals for the nation's economy and society remained essentially unchanged, but for a clearer stress on planning. Decentralisation would be “greatly assisted by a system of priorities for government expenditure taking into account both defence and development projects along planned lines.” Councils should be empowered to enter into franchise agreements with the private sector on development projects. The local press had a positive duty to “force the hands of government along the proper course of action that will give the best results.”<sup>89</sup>

One of the new backbencher's first initiatives was an attempt to revive national planning. Page had retained his curiosity about the wider world that dated back to his early travels in New Zealand and North America. In retirement, he scanned the constitutions and policy statements of recently independent former British colonies for ideas on planned development. After visiting the Indian sub-continent in March 1956 he told the House of the deep impression made on him by India's and Pakistan's planned use of rivers and by the Indian National Development Council. This Council demonstrated that it was possible to resolve “the eternal wrangling between the states and the Commonwealth over the disposal of revenue, and fix priorities for the undertakings necessary in Australia.”<sup>90</sup> It appears to have helped inspire his last concerted effort on planning. As in 1938, Page began by approaching a powerful business figure.

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<sup>88</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 12 September 1957, pp. 600-5.

<sup>89</sup> Speech by Page to Australian Provincial Press Conference, Brisbane, no date but from 1956, EPP, folder 2607. The *Australian Newspaper History Group Newsletter* gives 18 October 1956 and Sydney as the date and venue. The Association changed its title from 'Australasian' to 'Australian' in 1925. See Rod Kirkpatrick, 'Correcting Years of Confusion: The APPA Presidents', *Australian Newspaper History Group Newsletter*, no. 48, July 2008, p. 16.

<sup>90</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 22 May 1956, pp. 2319-23.

In April 1956 he contacted the stockbroker and grazier Samuel Hordern, seeking to discuss “the leadership that might be given to the business and financial world in Australia by some one with your reputation, influence and contacts to make possible the earliest change in our long-range planning that would put in [*sic*] a position similar to that of the United States in its period of very active growth.”<sup>91</sup> But this 1956 effort seems have come to nothing.

Page also resumed public campaigning for new states for the first time since 1949. His speech on the 1957-58 budget praised Victoria as the most economically balanced of the six states: “I believe that if we could have a number of states of the size of Victoria in this continent of ours we would see very rapid development.”<sup>92</sup> He corresponded with the Capricornia movement in central Queensland on their lack of success, attributed simply by Page to public apathy. Notwithstanding the disappointing Cohen experience of over thirty years earlier, he suggested they seek a Royal Commission.<sup>93</sup> In an October 1961 speech to the New England New State Annual Convention he proposed a fresh formula for his federal units: “about 5 degrees of latitude of coastline and their capital cities no more than 200 miles from practically all parts of the state.” Page reminded the convention that he had been “the leader of this movement in the Federal Parliament for over 40 years.”<sup>94</sup>

But the issue that attracted the greatest share of the elderly Page’s still formidable energy was that which retained the greatest emotional resonance for him – the harnessing of the Clarence River. In a May 1956 speech to the House he complained of how the Department of National Development still lacked a strategy for the national integration of electricity systems. By contrast, the old DMC had worked well with the states so that “magnificent projects were put into effect with complete amity and accord” (a considerable exaggeration,

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<sup>91</sup> Page to Hordern, 23 April 1956, EPP, folder 2608. This appears to have been the Samuel Hordern who was born in 1909, not his father of the same name who in 1956 was a semi-invalid of 80 years of age and died in June that year.

<sup>92</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 12 September 1957, p. 603.

<sup>93</sup> Page to A.E. Webb, Honorary Secretary, Capricornia New State Movement, 14 December 1959, EPP, folder 2310.

<sup>94</sup> ‘Speech by the Rt. Hon. Sir Earle Page, MP at Annual Convention of New England New State Movement’, Grafton, 13 October 1961, New England New State Movement Contents of Filing Cabinets, UNE Archives, A0547, Box 33, pp. 1, 4.

but with some basis).<sup>95</sup> Page even dealt with yet another report on the Clarence, commissioned by the Electricity Commission of New South Wales from the American consulting company Ebasco. Contrary to his idealisation of the private sector as broader minded than government, Ebasco cautiously concluded that The Gorge could best be developed after about 1980. For the present, local demand was just too small. This assessment attracted Page's bitter attacks for ignoring the potential stimulus to local development and how linking the Clarence and southern Queensland regions could make the project viable.<sup>96</sup>

Page responded to continued frustrations with his habitual fall-back strategy of trying to harness local councils. In 1956 he issued a new booklet reviving the Clarence Valley Authority idea, but now tied this to the restructure of local government. The Authority would provide "a ray of hope thrown out for our general future overseas financial relationships" and could even arrange international loans linked to migration (again reminiscent of the Migration Agreement of the 1920s).<sup>97</sup> The *Daily Examiner* dutifully supported a proposal to group shires into a new County Council that could "control the whole river."<sup>98</sup> Despite such enthusiasm, Page took care to present his plans as measured and realistic. He scorned an intermittently appearing variant of developmentalism, proposals for gargantuan engineering projects to exploit water resources. The most famed of these are the Bradfield and Idriess plans to irrigate Australia's interior by such means as by diverting water from Queensland rivers. These received much post-war press publicity, to which Page responded by collecting critical material, including obtaining an assessment from the civil engineer John R. Burton that such proposals were

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<sup>95</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 22 May 1956, p. 2320.

<sup>96</sup> 'Local Government Enquiry Commencing at Grafton on 10<sup>th</sup> September 1956, on Proposed Redivision of Local Government Boundaries – Evidence of Sir Earle Page, MP', *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10. Page organised what must have been an awkward lunch with the chair of the Ebasco study. Page claimed the chair was puzzled as to why he had not been asked to investigate the project's wider benefits; see *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 12 September 1957, p. 604.

<sup>97</sup> *Unique Opportunity for Co-ordinated National Development Based on Proposals for the Clarence*, p. 6; no date or place of publication, but internal evidence suggests Grafton 1956. This is a compilation of articles by Page that first appeared in the *Daily Examiner*. See also a proposal on financing of the Clarence Valley Authority, July 1956, EPP, folder 1746.

<sup>98</sup> *Daily Examiner*, 16 June 1956, clipping in EPP, folder 1798.

“physically impossible.” “Facts and not mere surmises” were needed, agreed Page.<sup>99</sup>

Page also engaged with two late and unexpected forums for his developmentalist agenda. These were novel in nature for him and each provided further confirmation of how the policy environment had changed. One was a major inquiry by a parliamentary committee into constitutional reform, the most comprehensive such review of the Constitution since the Peden Royal Commission. The other was an expert inquiry into the dairy industry which signalled the extension of market-orientated economic analysis to the rural sector. The results of both exercises underlined the decline in political appetite for major developmentalist-orientated change. But they also showed that Page remained well capable of presenting his ideas with force and clarity, and adept at capturing attention.

The Joint Committee on Constitutional Review established in May 1956 attracted Page’s last concerted attempts to amend section 124 on the creation of new states and to redesign Australian federalism. New state activists had been lobbying for a constitutional review since the early 1950s.<sup>100</sup> It was potentially a very influential inquiry, with membership that included Arthur Calwell, David Drummond, Alexander Downer and Gough Whitlam.<sup>101</sup> Page’s fulsome evidence to the Committee was perhaps the most comprehensive call for constitutional change by a senior political figure of this time. In his January 1957 submission, Page reflected that he had been pursuing constitutional reform for decades “like Sisyphus”, with the 1928 referendum his sole success.

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<sup>99</sup> Burton’s 1959 assessment and other material on the Bradfield Plan and related issues by F.R.V. Timbury, Griffith Taylor *et al.* is in EPP, folder 1758. For a summary of such vast proposals, see Robert Wooding, ‘Populate, Parch and Panic: Two Centuries of Dreaming About Nation-building in Inland Australia’, in John Butcher (ed.) *Australia Under Construction: Nation-building Past, Present and Future*, ANU E Press, Canberra, 2008, pp. 57-70.

<sup>100</sup> Ulrich Ellis, ‘Federal Constitution Review Committee – Why the Unanimous Recommendations on New States Demand Immediate Action,’ 22 September 1961, New England New State Movement Contents of Filing Cabinets, UNE Archives, A0547, Box 33. But there were other prominent proponents of a comprehensive review of the Constitution, not least of which was the Chief Justice of the High Court, Sir John Latham; see *The Argus*, 8 April 1952, p. 14.

<sup>101</sup> The committee was said to have been important in forming Whitlam’s ideas on constitutional reform and the aggressive use of section 96 tied grants to the states; see Jenny Hocking, *Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History*, The Miegunyah Press, Carlton, 2008, pp. 181-6.

With typical optimism (and overstatement), he asserted that there was now “universal agreement that decentralisation of local administration and a balance in the Commonwealth Parliament are essential to efficient and satisfactory government.”<sup>102</sup> Page also identified himself as the creator of four major co-operative bodies – the Loan Council, the AAC, the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Federal Transport Council.<sup>103</sup>

Page detailed in his evidence several variations on the theme that authority to create a new state be shifted away from state parliaments and towards a formula based on local petitions, referenda within the state and the area concerned, and the Commonwealth parliament.<sup>104</sup> His fundamental arguments for new states were increasingly ingenious but continued to reflect faith that a simple adjustment or two in governance would ensure the desired outcome. He told the Committee that new states would hasten constitutional reform by making it easier to satisfy the requirement for a majority of states to support a yes vote at referendum. New states, he seemed to assume, would surely be more open-minded on constitutional change. They would also, he said, improve consistency in national regulation of the economy by increasing the proportion of commerce crossing state borders and hence falling under nationally consistent federal law.<sup>105</sup>

Page also proposed that national government now be radically reordered along co-operative lines using federal-state councils, akin to what he had called for in 1942 – “Cabinets of the governments of Australia” that would take the Loan Council and the AAC as exemplars. They would operate initially on a voluntary

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<sup>102</sup> ‘Statement by Sir Earle Page on Constitutional Amendments Made to a Meeting of the Federal Parliamentary Constitutional Committee Held in Sydney in January 1957’, EPP, folder 1659, p. 1.

<sup>103</sup> Transcript of Page’s evidence to parliamentary constitutional review committee, 15 January 1957, Sydney, p. 52, EPP, folder 1660.

<sup>104</sup> ‘Statement by Sir Earle Page on Constitutional Amendments...’, *op. cit.*, p. 5-13.

<sup>105</sup> Page also reasoned that with only six states, four needed to vote yes to approve a constitutional amendment, a majority of two to one; with more states, the proportion required in favour would fall. Even more indirectly, Page thought that the existence of a greater number of states would encourage industry to work out formulae for preventing duplication in arbitration decisions. See Page, *ibid.*, pp. 3-5. A similarly creative Page argument was his comment in a 1930 speech that decentralisation of industry would boost railways, as the transfer of high value goods over long distances to sea ports would enable them to charge higher freight charges; see his speech to House of Representatives, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 17 July 1930, p. 4254.

basis “that accustoms the public to their existence”, prior to being put to referendum for elevation to constitutional status. He proposed a supplementary Loan Council to co-ordinate semi-governmental and local government finances; a new Federal Transport Council that would also cover hydroelectricity and flood control; and a Council of Taxation to collect revenue for all governments. Education was also “eminently suited to a combined Federal-state approach”: perhaps the two levels of government could share tertiary or technical education, or the Commonwealth take responsibility for a particular subject.<sup>106</sup> Page additionally wanted a new Interstate Commission to deal with cross-border issues such as water use, and to investigate discrimination in interstate commerce and assistance to the states.<sup>107</sup>

He was also thinking about how to simplify amendment of the Constitution. Having long seen the Constitution as an obstacle to policy innovation (placing him increasingly closer to the ALP on constitutional reform than to his Liberal and Country Party colleagues), Page told the committee that parliament should be able to amend basic “machinery of government” provisions itself. Only wider “principles of government” changes should require a referendum, an idea borrowed from the Indian constitution. Eventually, he hoped, “we can obtain amendment without referendum” by agreeing changes with the state parliaments alone.<sup>108</sup>

Page was rarely one to advocate cautious incremental change, especially if he judged the time right for a realignment. His evidence to the Committee is a good example. The committee’s interim report handed down in 1958 (the final appeared the following year) included amongst its many recommendations the amendment of section 124 to enable creation of a new state if supported by

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<sup>106</sup> ‘Statement by Sir Earle Page on Constitutional Amendments...’, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-7.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4; also transcript of Page’s evidence to the committee, *op. cit.*, pp. 7, 45-6. An Interstate Commission was established in 1912 but achieved little before being effectively dissolved in 1920.

<sup>108</sup> Transcript of Page’s evidence, *ibid.*, p. 48; also *ibid.*, p. 18-9. Interestingly, Page commented here that the success of the 1928 referendum on the Financial Agreement owed something to the ballot paper presenting voters with a choice of ‘1’ or ‘2’ to tick rather than ‘yes’ or ‘no’, electors being reluctant to directly say ‘yes’ to more power for government. “Fear” he reflected “is nearly always the dominating factor that determines the way people vote at an election or referendum”; see p. 3 of this transcript.

referendum both in the area concerned and in the whole state affected.<sup>109</sup> Although Page in his memoirs contrived to hail its recommendation to liberalise section 124 as finally signalling that “the acceptance of the new states idea is no longer in doubt,” this was almost the only Page proposal the Committee adopted.<sup>110</sup> (It also called for new Commonwealth powers to overcome section 92’s inhibiting of primary product marketing).<sup>111</sup> As a multiparty entity, the Committee was prone to compromise. Co-operative federalism was effectively ignored, and on constitutional amendment the committee merely recommended a limited watering down of the referendum formula by requiring approval by only three states.<sup>112</sup> The Joint Committee on Constitutional Review was Page’s last major engagement with issues of constitutional reform and co-operative federalism, and it effectively rejected his vision of radical change.

The other inquiry with which Page grappled at this very end of his career presented an even greater challenge, an encounter with rigorous economic analysis. The Commonwealth’s 1960 Dairy Industry Committee of Enquiry was a pioneering study of the economic and social outcomes of rural industry assistance.<sup>113</sup> It arose from concerns that long-term subsidisation of the dairy industry was inefficient and had effectively institutionalised low-income small-scale farming. Page could not ignore this important review, especially given dairy’s importance in the Grafton area. In typical style, his evidence went far beyond the subsidisation that industry lobbyists so vigorously defended to instead propose nationwide action on such “production side” issues as fodder conservation, water conservation, hydroelectricity, soft loans to fund irrigation, research and transport co-ordination. He opposed any restriction of production but his defence of subsidisation was lukewarm: this could “scale down” in the long-term once production issues had been deal with.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> *Report from the Joint Committee on Constitutional Review*, Canberra, 1958, p. 21.

<sup>110</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, pp. 438-40. The New England New State Movement’s submission to the committee called for a 60 per cent plus yes vote in the area in question as sole requirement; see ‘Submission by the New England New State Movements’ to Joint Committee of Constitutional Review, EPP, folder 2138 (2).

<sup>111</sup> *Report from the Joint Committee on Constitutional Review*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 170-2.

<sup>113</sup> *Report of the Dairy Industry Committee of Enquiry on the Australian Dairy Industry*, Government Printer, Canberra, 1960; a copy of this report is at EPP, folder 2023.

<sup>114</sup> Page’s evidence of 1 March 1960, EPP, folders 1157, 2023.

Significantly, the Committee sought advice from two professors of economics, Richard Downing and Peter Karmel. They proved highly critical of the extent of assistance provided to the industry in reaching their conclusion that some of the capital and labour it employed “could be more productively employed elsewhere.”<sup>115</sup> The Committee in its final report accorded Page’s evidence a three paragraph summary and analysis of its own, a clear and somewhat flattering nod to his special prominence. It professed to recognise “the value of national schemes of such importance” and went on to recommend that financial assistance to increase the productivity of eligible farmers cover (amongst much else) fodder conservation, irrigation and water conservation.

But the Committee was otherwise deterred by the sheer scale of Page’s proposals, concluding that “they are of such magnitude and would be so costly as to require examination and evaluation by experts.” Its main findings were “that the industry should be re-formed on a sounder economic basis”, that “direct financial assistance should be dispensed with as soon as possible” and “the direction of assistance should be gradually changed from income-increasing to cost-reducing.” A small number of farms that could never be viable “will need to be eased out of the industry.”<sup>116</sup> Although such conclusions were effectively dismissed by the government, this inquiry was a clear sign of a new preparedness to apply economic analysis to rural industries which was to grow and continue beyond Page’s time.

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<sup>115</sup> A summary of Downing and Karmel’s findings is provided in the report, pp. 77-8; see also Nicholas Brown, *Richard Downing: Economics, Advocacy and Social Reform in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 2001, p. 207, on the wider precepts of economic reform influencing these economists.

<sup>116</sup> The text on Page’s evidence is at pp. 101-2 of the report: the Committee’s findings and recommendations are at pp. 115-7. The Federal government’s response to the final report was classically dismissive. It committed itself only “to discuss with the state governments and the industry the question of the reconstruction of the industry, taking into consideration the views of the industry”, EPP, folder 2127. The reaction of the Australian Dairy Industry Council was one of studied horror: “this enquiry was conceived with the objective of terminating the dairy subsidy”; submission to Minister for Primary Industry, 1 March 1961, EPP, folder 2128. The findings were nonetheless judged by Samuel Wadham to be broadly an “ill-balanced compromise” between expert advice to the committee and political acceptability; see Samuel Wadham, R. Kent Wilson and Joyce Wood, *Land Utilization in Australia*, fourth edition, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, 1964 (first published 1939), pp. 153-4.

**Page's final campaigns: "I want to see the work completed before I die"**

Page remained as active as ever to the end, both on policy and personal fronts. Ethel Page died in May 1958 and a year later he married his long-serving secretary, Jean Thomas, with Stanley Bruce best man at the ceremony at London's St. Paul's Cathedral. (The second Lady Page died in 2011). Ann Moyal, a young historian who worked with the elderly Page on his memoirs, recalls fondly his "merriment and verve" even in this late stage of his life. Though Page was a "fiery particle", she noted that he forgave political enemies.<sup>117</sup> Ellis agreed, himself recalling Page's longstanding tendency to separate policy disputes from personalities and his generally "happy view of life".<sup>118</sup>

But privately, Page in these final years remained baffled by his continuing failure to make substantive policy progress. With time and repeated disappointment, a sense of stridency entered his pronouncements as he sought to reverse declining interest in his brand of developmentalism. Ever one to seek out topical new arguments, he warned that by developing the coalfields stretching from the Hunter Valley to Port Kembla, the New South Wales government was merely creating "a neat target for atomic bombs."<sup>119</sup> Page noted the ideas of physicist Marcus Oliphant on how decentralisation could limit the effects of nuclear attack.<sup>120</sup>

Continued lack of progress on the Clarence now loomed as his foremost anxiety. He professed himself "amazed that no proper analysis has been made of what is called the ancillary benefits that would be gained from the harnessing of these waters."<sup>121</sup> Page turned increasingly to appeals via the press. His now well-established persona as the elder statesman of national development provided a ready basis for articles ridiculing governments, most spectacularly a piece in *Australian Country Magazine* of September 1959 entitled 'Our Second

<sup>117</sup> Ann Moyal, *Breakfast with Beaverbrook: Memoirs of an Independent Woman*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1995, p. 150.

<sup>118</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

<sup>119</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 12 September 1957, p. 604.

<sup>120</sup> Undated notes titled 'Marcus Oliphant,' possibly a record of discussion, EPP, folder 2035.

<sup>121</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 12 September 1957, p. 604.

Snowy – Wasted.’ This presented a suite of photos of Page gazing out over the Clarence River and even drinking its waters. The accompanying text highlighted his “all Australian, non-political standpoint” and called Page “energetic, nimble-minded”, envisaging that perhaps the end result of his campaigning would be dubbed the Earle Page Dam.<sup>122</sup> Even Gough Whitlam, Labor Deputy Leader and rising political star, applied the elder statesman tag to Page during the parliamentary debate on the report of the constitutional committee, without evident irony.<sup>123</sup>

Page had by the late 1950s also firmly grasped the mantle of party elder: no doubt this helped colleagues tolerate his hectoring on regionalism and planning. He was respected more for his longevity and role in the Country Party’s early success than for his current policy views. At the Party’s April 1957 Annual Conference held at Rockhampton he reminded colleagues what the Party had once stood for and listed its past “many great reforms which stand out as bulwarks and milestones of national progress.”<sup>124</sup> Page presented a slide show to encourage delegates to take new states and the TVA seriously.<sup>125</sup> But while the party’s 1958 Federal Platform provided for a Commonwealth-state Commission to undertake the “economic analysis of river basin projects”, and for a Commonwealth-state planning authority “accompanied by machinery to determine the priority of projects,” neither was implemented.<sup>126</sup>

Not that Page admitted defeat – that would not have been the man. One of his last efforts on planning was a September 1960 speech to the House in which

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<sup>122</sup> *Australian Country Magazine*, September 1959, pp. 14-7, 91, copy at EPP, folder 2589. Another example of Page using the popular press is an article in *Pix* magazine, ‘Wasted wealth of the Clarence’, 13 November 1948, Sydney, pp. 20-3, copy at EPP, folder 2553.

<sup>123</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 13 April 1961, pp. 820, 822.

<sup>124</sup> These included “the co-operation of the sugar industry”; organised marketing of butter, wheat and canned fruit; the tariffs needed to “sustain the system” of organised marketing; co-ordination of state and federal borrowing; a central bank; the rural credits system; the independence of the Commonwealth Savings Bank; tax concessions for rural development; the Federal Aid Roads system; the “National Health Insurance Scheme”; TB eradication; the CSIR; free school milk; the Wool Research Organisation; and the Meat Board. Page speech to Country Party Annual Conference, 12 April 1957, EPP, folder 2607.

<sup>125</sup> A list of the slides is at EPP, folder 2622, but not the slides themselves.

<sup>126</sup> Country Party Federal Platform and Policy, July 1958, Earle Page Papers, UNE Archives, A0180, Box 3, folder 29, p. 7.

he again called for “a permanent body” of experts to cover “all the various forms of development and such matters as education”, using “the Loan Council machinery.”<sup>127</sup> Two months later, the now 80 year-old Page returned to the fray at the Country Party Federal Council by pointing out that as the early Party had faced an “inelastic Australian Federal System, which limited combined national effort,” it “at once specialised on devising practical machinery for such fruitful governmental co-operation.” But he also regretted his own continued failure to harness the nation’s water resources and so called on the Council to endorse a permanent organisation of all three tiers of government to develop a “control programme of all the waters of Australia.”<sup>128</sup>

Right up to the very end of his life, Page remained the main parliamentary spokesman for new statism. Indeed, his last major parliamentary speech – effectively the end of his public career – was part of the 12 October 1961 debate on the Constitutional Committee’s findings on new states. (His very last speech to the House was a shorter statement of 19 October on rail gauge standardization: typically, he noted that the Bruce-Page government had proposed this nearly forty years earlier). This debate was a final reminder of the difficulties he still faced. Page described the Committee’s report as the first ever unanimity in the Federal Parliament on constitutional reform. He recounted the Commonwealth’s 1926 offer to take over Western Australia’s north – wistfully, he invited his audience to “imagine the vast development that would have occurred under such a plan as this.”<sup>129</sup> But Page’s hopes of elevating development policy above party politics received a last blow. In supporting the amendment of section 124, Whitlam added that although the ALP “is not averse to new states” it was “averse to sovereign states.”<sup>130</sup> Labor’s Clyde Cameron added a well-researched yet still fundamentally unfair personal attack on Page for failing to push new states while a minister between

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<sup>127</sup> EPP, folder 2141; the wording recorded by Hansard is slightly different, see *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 7 September 1960, pp. 893-4.

<sup>128</sup> Page speech to Country Party Federal Council, 25-26 November 1960, EPP, folder 2021.

<sup>129</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 12 October 1961, pp. 1985. Page’s interest in Northern Australia was more often lukewarm: in June 1961 he pulled out of a parliamentarians’ trip to the north so he could instead visit the US at the behest of private insurance companies to help the “fight against the nationalisation of medicine”; see Page to C.S. Christian of CSIRO, 9 June 1961, EPP, folder 2031.

<sup>130</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 12 October 1961, p. 1991.

the wars.<sup>131</sup> Support from his own Country Party, let alone the Liberals, was conspicuously thin: only F.A. Bland, now a Liberal MP, chipped in supporting new states and local government as barriers to “administrative centralization which would destroy our democratic way of life.”<sup>132</sup>

Page was ending his public life more politically isolated than ever. Although there was still support for elements of his ideas, few if any MPs other than Drummond shared his breadth of synthesis. The new state movement was by this time showing every sign of becoming one of Australia’s greatest lost causes. This bewildered Ellis, Thompson and Page himself. Ellis wrote of the Country Party’s “inexplicable reluctance” to insist on decentralisation.<sup>133</sup> Page simply pointed to the self-interest of cities and local political ignorance.<sup>134</sup> Yet creating new states out of old is difficult in any representative democracy. R.S. Parker identified only three notable international instances, all in the United States.<sup>135</sup> Australia’s own three breakaways came in the nineteenth century when boundaries were still formative: by the early 1960s Australians had long become accustomed to their existing states and were wary of constitutional change.<sup>136</sup> Although new state advocates complained vociferously about constitutional barriers, section 124 has the merit of clarity. Constitutions are meant to provide certainty, not the instability that would occur if a referendum were to be triggered whenever a local grievance arose. Nor could any constitutional formula avoid the immense practical difficulties of dividing old states into new.

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2013-6

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2001.

<sup>133</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>134</sup> See for example Page’s speech to the Annual Convention of the New England New State Movement, Grafton, 13 October 1961, New England New State Movement Contents of Filing Cabinets, UNE Archives, A0547, Box 33.

<sup>135</sup> Kentucky, Maine and West Virginia; see Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 1. Harman also points to Canadian provinces created after confederation in 1867; see Harman, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>136</sup> There are some more recent new state sympathisers. Geoffrey Blainey for example feels that although federalism is apt for so large a country, too few states were created for it to function well; see Hudson and Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 27; also *The Cairns Post*, 25 November 2009, ‘Call for North Queensland to Split.’ Former Labor federal minister Chris Hurford proposed in 2004 a federation of 51 regional entities that would stimulate “community action” and a “more civil society”; see Hudson and Brown, p. 49. Some more recent advocates, such as the late Bryan Pape of the UNE School of Law, drew upon their new state sympathies in campaigning against constitutionally dubious Commonwealth expenditure; see George Williams, ‘Bryan Pape and His Legacy to the Law’, *University of Queensland Law Journal*, vol. 34, no.1, pp. 29-46.

Page in retirement from office remained unable to answer convincingly Cohen's devastating critique of three-and-a-half decades earlier. New state movements were only effective when by combining widespread public support with political leadership from figures like Page they were able to secure additional government resources, notably in northern New South Wales. Popular support was far less stable than intellectual interest, hence R.G. Neal's observation that the new state movements were "stronger as means to ends, than as ends in themselves", with the centrality of material concerns resulting in their fluctuating with local economic peaks and troughs.<sup>137</sup> While such assessments underestimate the passions and ideals that the separatist cause was capable of raising at times, the rise of the Country Party probably helped head off new states by providing more conventional political means of dealing with regional grievances.

Page committed himself to leaving a written legacy by completing his memoirs. He had mused on this as early as 1939 when he told Drummond that he hoped to write a book on "the aspirations, ideals, philosophy and history of our work for those who come after us to have a touchstone for their job."<sup>138</sup> A few years later, he first discussed producing a major book with Ellis so as "to shed important light on post-war problems and the manner of their solution", but decided that an autobiography would carry more weight. After various false starts, the writing process finally began in January 1956 with Page dictating much of the text and Ellis making refinements. By 1958 the draft "was reaching alarming proportions." It was only rendered publishable posthumously in 1963 following extensive and skilful editing by Ann Moyal (then Mozley).<sup>139</sup> The result, *Truant Surgeon*, constitutes both an overt attempt to guide future policy and a tacit admission of unfinished business that he hoped others would conclude in his absence. Throughout he stoutly defended his record of policy achievement, attributing failures to others being unable to appreciate his vision of the nation. John Latham reviewed it favourably as "a real contribution to

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<sup>137</sup> Neale, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-3, 23.

<sup>138</sup> Page to Drummond, 15 April 1939, EPP, folio 2706.

<sup>139</sup> Notes by Ellis on the drafting of *Truant Surgeon*, 16 February 1963, Ellis papers, NLA, MS 821. Ellis says that Page first raised the proposed book with him "about 1943."

Australian political history by a highly competent patriotic Australian”, despite the drawback that Page “does not say much about any contrary opinions.”<sup>140</sup>

Page also hoped to produce a separate book on electricity and water. This was to be called *Missed Opportunities – Turning Water into Gold* and may well have been more important to him.<sup>141</sup> Although this other volume was never completed, his published memoirs concluded with a succinct statement of his formula for Australian developmentalism that touched on his continuing commitment to regionalism, strong central government, hydroelectricity, co-operative federalism and planning:

...with a background of over half a century’s study, I am convinced that the simple remedy is at hand – one that has been applied in handling other major Australian problems, such as finance, marketing and roads – through a partnership of Federal, state and local authorities. In such a partnership, the Federal government, as the sole income-tax collector, should provide the capital for the headworks free of interest and redemption, the state government the water channels, and the local authorities, which in each case would be the local river basin authority, should advise and assist the water user on the spot.<sup>142</sup>

He quoted here his speech of 9 March 1961 to the House proclaiming the development of water resources to be “the most important point of all”, which should harness “all the large rivers from the north to the south.” Finally, he said of the Clarence “I first became interested in this scheme forty years ago, and I want to see the work completed before I die.”<sup>143</sup>

He never did. Page succumbed to cancer at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney – where he had been a young doctor at the start of the century – on 20 December 1961, at the age of 81 years and four months. That same day the result for Cowper in the federal election of 9 December was declared: the seat that he had held since 1919 returned a Labor member for the first time. Page had been an eminently successful local member, foremostly by winning 16

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<sup>140</sup> John Latham, ‘Sir Earle Page: *Truant Surgeon*’, *Quadrant*, vol. 7, no. 4, Spring 1963, p. 85.

<sup>141</sup> Advice from Page’s granddaughter Helen Snyders indicates that the main text of this no longer exists; fragments survive in the EPP, folders 2776, 2777, 2778 and 2785.

<sup>142</sup> Page, *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*, p. 441.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 442, quoting a speech in parliament of 9 March 1961.

elections in succession. His achievements for his electors included infrastructure such as the long-sought bridge over the Clarence: more recently he had bombarded the Postmaster-General with letters on extending television to northern New South Wales, entirely undeterred by increasingly terse replies.<sup>144</sup> Only twice did his primary vote in Cowper fall below 50 per cent, in 1943 when the ALP recorded its greatest ever national election victory and in 1961 when the government lost 15 seats in the wake of the credit squeeze. Page had earlier considered retirement from parliament but only on the condition that Ellis, one of the few people he trusted to uphold his national vision, succeed him in Cowper.<sup>145</sup> Once cancer had taken a grip Page could no longer campaign. His primary vote in 1961 fell by a massive 15 per cent from that recorded at the 1958 election, well above the overall swing against the government. Menzies privately blamed the loss of Cowper on Page's refusal to retire.<sup>146</sup>

Page's obituary in the *Medical Journal of Australia* praised his "invincible optimism." "Page never grew old", was a great reader, and possessed an "orderly mind" that made him precise in thought and action.<sup>147</sup> In the parliamentary tributes, John McEwen recognised that Page "was responsible for many monumental changes in the Australian political structure" and Arthur Calwell recalled his "missionary's zeal."<sup>148</sup> One newspaper obituary entitled 'Elder Statesman Colourful Figure', noted Page's consistent worldview and "leadership in the development of a new form of co-operative federation", with the Loan Council, the AAC and tied road grants his main achievements.<sup>149</sup>

It was his great confidant, David Drummond, who showed the most empathy with Page's life and vision. To Drummond, Page's "outstanding characteristic was a wide and far-seeing vision", which put him "far ahead of any other man in

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<sup>144</sup> See correspondence in EPP, folders 2129 and 2132. Page's *Daily Examiner* was keen on setting up a television company.

<sup>145</sup> Notes by Ellis on the drafting of *Truant Surgeon*, *op. cit.*

<sup>146</sup> Heather Henderson (ed.), *Letters to my Daughter: Robert Menzies, letters 1955-75*, Pier 9, Millers Point, 2011, letter Menzies to Henderson of 17 December 1961, p.78.

<sup>147</sup> Obituary by Dr George Bell *et al.*, *op. cit.*

<sup>148</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 20 February 1962, pp. 15, 16.

<sup>149</sup> *The Canberra Times*, 21 December 1961, pp. 5, 10.

his own party or in most other political parties.” He recalled Page’s commitment to constitutional reform and the harnessing of water power, and his role as “the real driving force” in the early new states movement, all of which made him “a realistic dreamer” with “a vision and a practical idea of how to carry it into effect.” Drummond accurately told parliament that what Page had recently said before the Joint Committee on Constitutional Review was “really expressive in very large measure, of the ideas that he had promulgated 30 or more years before.”<sup>150</sup>

During the 1950s Page had found little in government policy to which he could hitch such visions other than sporadic engagement with national planning and a cautious parliamentary venture into constitutional reform. Increasing isolation from his peers suggests that political scepticism about visionary forms of developmentalism strengthened considerably during this decade. A new consensus about Australian development emerged based on the steady management of national growth, exemplified by the policies of McEwen and incorporated into structures of government that made only nominal provision for the visionary ventures of Earle Page. But even if he did not influence official priorities to the extent that he hoped, Page still kept some ideas alive by inciting reactions and attracting publicity, just as he had under the Chifley government. That his final efforts after his retirement from the ministry in 1956 to leave a lasting personal legacy struck a distinct chord with the media is indicative of lively and continuing popular support for developmentalism.

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<sup>150</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 20 February 1962, pp. 18, 19.

## **CONCLUSION**

Earle Page's vision, longevity and political seniority make him twentieth-century Australia's most important developmentalist. He was the foremost representative of this strand in Australian politics when it peaked in influence, especially as Treasurer in the 1920s. His story shows that Australian developmentalism has a far more varied and richer history than implied by observers such as Donald Horne and S.J. Butlin.

Page's determination and capacity for synthesis engaged him with, and so helps illuminate, such varied historical currents as regionalism, decentralisation, co-operative federalism and the application of seemingly transformative technologies. That he was only partially successful in implementing his ambitious synthesis should not obscure his major and enduring influence on several of its specific components. Page's incessant proselytising was instrumental in giving these elements a more lasting place in national political culture than they would otherwise have had. He made important contributions to co-operative federalism that are still influential to-day. He helped consolidate the Commonwealth's dominance through the 1928 Financial Agreement and the early systematisation of tied grants as means of extending its fiscal and policy influence. He gave regionalism lasting significance. And he helped uphold national economic planning over decades, including during periods when it was distinctly unfashionable.

Through the establishment of the Loan Council and the Australian Agricultural Council, and by promoting them as exemplars of federal co-operation, Page – as Ellis observed – “gave this idea orderly and practical expression”.<sup>1</sup> His initiatives can now be seen as antecedents of to-day's Council of Australian Governments and of other co-operative bodies. The history of Australian federalism is broadly one of growth in central power and nationally-imposed co-operation, set against a corresponding failure – despite many initiatives – to strike an agreed and lasting balance between states and Commonwealth.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

Page probably more fuelled this tension than resolved it, but he also contributed mightily (perhaps ironically) to shifting the balance of power towards the Commonwealth. State governments were to him obstacles around which he had to manoeuvre to implement his national vision. He was far from alone among Australian political leaders in confronting these issues, but has a claim to having set some basic strands of the debate via his own distinctive mix of centralism and regionalism.

By pioneering the use of tied grants to the states, Page helped usher in the Commonwealth's fiscal dominance and propensity to seek a role in policy fields beyond its stated constitutional role. The wider importance of this only became apparent in the 1950s when the Commonwealth significantly broadened tied grants to fund university expansion. Under Gough Whitlam, tied grants reached about 40 per cent of total federal grants to the states, but it was Page who first gave them a firm place in Australian federalism.<sup>2</sup> Of all the policy issues Page pursued, his efforts to overcome federalism as a barrier to his nationwide agenda and the contribution this made to centralism had the most lasting national impact.

By contrast, new statism declined after Page's death, hastened by the narrow but decisive defeat of the 1967 referendum on the separation of northern New South Wales. But political interest in the allied concept of regionalism persists. Page did more than any other individual to embed this spatial and community-based dimension into modern Australian political thought. No-one else of such political stature pursued regionalism and related decentralisation so intensively over such a period of time. Yet post-Page, a continuing sense that local government is too weak and state governments are too large has encouraged continued – and inconclusive – experiments in applying various advisory and administrative structures to regional development, right up to the current

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<sup>2</sup> Even in the mid-1960s a Canadian federalism scholar described use of such grants in Australia as “minor and quite recent.” In 1964-5 only a sizeable minority of Commonwealth grants to the states were tied, £137.8 million out of a total of £494.3 million. See J.A. Maxwell, *Commonwealth-State Financial Relations in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1967, p. 61. On the proportion of tied grants out of total federal grants to the states, see Scott Bennett and Richard Webb, *Specific Purpose Payments and the Australian Federal System*, Research Paper no. 17 2007-8, Parliament of Australia, Canberra, 2008, figure 1.

Regional Development Australia committees.<sup>3</sup> Page's most distinctive contribution here was his challenge to more conventional new staters that regionalism ought not just be an expression of local patriotism but should be used to spark economic and social vitalism across the nation.

Page also upheld hydroelectricity, rural residential universities and planning as public issues during his long career, but left less of a legacy on each. The 1960-61 credit squeeze led to the 1965 Vernon Committee of Economic Enquiry that raised a flicker of renewed interest in planning by recommending "more co-ordinated long-term planning of public investment between the states and the Commonwealth."<sup>4</sup> But by the time such findings were handed down, the economy had recovered and Vernon's proposed independent expert advisory bodies were summarily dismissed by Prime Minister Menzies.<sup>5</sup>

What Page did – and did not – achieve helps to provide a more nuanced understanding of Australian developmentalism by defining what the nation's political culture would tolerate. This fell well short of grand national visions and was increasingly limited to the fostering of a steady improvement in material living standards. Reactions to his initiatives collectively challenge assumptions by some historians and other commentators that the Australian body politic of his time was firmly committed to ambitious nation-building. In a practical sense, his career suggests that government and public support for developmentalist proposals to shape Australia was usually very mixed.

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<sup>3</sup> Others include the Whitlam government's Regional Organisations of Councils and the Keating government's Regional Development Organisations. For outlines of post-Page regionalism see Lyndon Megarity, 'Local Government and the Commonwealth: An Evolving Relationship', Parliamentary Library Research Paper no. 10, 2010-11, 31 January 2011; and Andrew H. Kelly, Brian Dollery and Bligh Grant, 'Regional Development and Local Government: Three Generations of Federal Intervention,' *Australasian Journal of Regional Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2009, pp. 171-93. A.J. Brown refers to continuing "conflict around a frozen territorial structure which is widely recognised as delivering *neither* the level of national unity *nor* the serious political decentralization which many Australians have long desired"; 'Constitutional Schizophrenia', *op. cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> Committee of Economic Enquiry, *Report*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1965, p. 17.12. It was informally named for its chair James Vernon, managing director of Colonial Sugar Refining.

<sup>5</sup> See Martin, *Robert Menzies: A Life, Volume 2, op. cit.*, p. 531 and *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 21 September 1965, pp. 1080-7. In recommending a Special Projects Commission, Vernon drew on British and Canadian exemplars, not Page's admired DMC; see Committee of Economic Enquiry, *op. cit.*, pp. 3.16, 17.28.

Support most consistently came from applied intellectuals such as Bland, Thompson, Holmes and Page himself. Page's ideas on national development were challenged on several fronts. Political rivals in the Country Party preferred to see its persona settle into protecting an established stake in the political mainstream. Vested interests, particularly among primary producers, gave little priority to the nationwide, production-side initiatives that Page advocated. Outright sceptics, such as those press commentators who were dismissive of Page's ill-defined proposals for national planning, ensured these schemes received only brief consideration. Even more tellingly, Page was increasingly challenged by a growing body of professional expertise within and outside government. From often hard experience, such experts became increasingly aware of the constraints imposed by aridity, soil infertility, a small and dispersed population, isolation from international markets, the caution of potential overseas investors, an intractably fractious federal system and the fundamental limits of government. Popular accounts of national development that refer to such famed projects as the Snowy Mountains Scheme often fail to also consider the many development proposals that were rejected, of which Page was a fecund generator. Such rejection reflected the sound technical judgement of the times: it also suggests a more cautious political culture than Australians frequently see themselves as supporting.

Page's developmentalism was thus restrained by cautious economists, engineers, officials, business leaders and state governments. The states in 1923 opposed national planning of electrical power. The Cohen Royal Commission clinically dissected the case for new states. The DMC and the New South Wales government doubted Page's vision for the Clarence. Engineers scorned the practicality of hydroelectricity on most of mainland Australia. National planning proposals attracted the accusation that Page was a mere dreamer. Committees on constitutional review and the dairy industry declined to accept his call for nationwide action. Even an ostensible ally such as Herbert Gepp was wary of proposals for unlimited development as talk that

“damages our credit abroad and hampers the formation of rational plans for development.”<sup>6</sup>

Page’s incessant campaigning and the responses he elicited unintendedly helped to draw out this growing realisation of national limitations. These were (and often still are) so fundamental that they could not be as readily overcome by public appeals as Page hoped. National optimism that Australia could be engineered to realise perceptions of a near limitless development potential wilted in the face of experience and a growing emphasis on seeking benefits from within an increasingly hardened political culture. Over time, Page had fewer and fewer allies in government and business who shared his breadth of vision.

Nor was the Australian public practically supportive. Local demands for amenities and a wider sense that Australia was falling short of its potential helped Page win attention but were only occasionally sufficient for implementation of ambitious development projects. Popular enthusiasm, such as for new states, covered only selected elements of Page’s vision and was readily assuaged, leaving him lamenting public indifference. Big projects like the Snowy were government initiatives that the public acquiesced in rather than demanded.<sup>7</sup> Page’s long career helps show that although developmentalism was a major theme in twentieth century Australia, it has been strongest as an enduring but abstract national ideal that only occasionally bore fruit. It has persisted at the popular level but increasingly struggled as a vision that policy makers were prepared to strive towards. By mid-century it often manifested as a form of nostalgia from which Page at the end of his career gained some belated public praise. This does not appear to have fundamentally changed in a nation that now functions through an array of entrenched policy compromises and in which policy debate is commonly expressed as an ongoing tension between populist and technocratic world views.

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<sup>6</sup> Gepp, *Democracy’s Danger*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> Hirst makes a similar point about policy reforms of the Hawke and Howard governments; see John Hirst, *Looking for Australia: Historical Essays*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2010, p. 144.

What Page was proudest of achieving was not orderly marketing or trade agreements, but the University of New England, the Financial Agreement and the AAC, each of which constituted a step towards his broader vision. Tireless though he was, Page's policy passions were not wholly his inventions: major policy initiatives are rarely solely the work of an individual. There are antecedents for the Loan Council and Financial Agreement; he pioneered but did not invent tied grants; and regionalism and decentralisation predate him.<sup>8</sup> Aitkin's summation of Page as probably the most inventive federal politician of the twentieth century thus needs qualification, but he was entirely accurate that Page is Australia's most under-regarded such figure.

Page's originality lies more in his capacity for synthesis, which made him a far wider visionary than other prominent developmentalists in government. Thomas Playford focussed on outbidding rival states to secure manufacturing for South Australia. Queensland's William Forgan Smith favoured public works and primary industry. In Tasmania, Eric Reece as a minister and later Premier considered hydroelectricity to be a basis for decentralisation and industry. Page, by contrast, was a more truly national figure who assembled a far wider vision of Australia by drawing on regionalism, technology and rational planning to animate issues as diverse as new states, higher education and co-operative federalism.

Page offered an alternative role for government to W.K. Hancock's oft-repeated description of Australians seeing "the State as a vast public utility."<sup>9</sup> He instead saw it as applying triggers of regionalism, planning and electrification to catalyse communities and private enterprise into leading development. Page's devotion to this nationwide vision has been obscured by the wider Country Party's sectoralism, assumptions that Australian political thought is invariably derivative and a focus on the drama of his 1939 clash with Menzies. Also important was biographers' tendency until recently to conventionalise Australian political figures – overlooking Deakin's spiritualism and Curtin's

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<sup>8</sup> Statistician Timothy Coghlan, for example, warned in 1902 of "abnormal aggregation of the population"; quoted in Graeme Davison, 'Decentralisation' in Davison, Hirst and Macintyre, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>9</sup> W.K. Hancock, *Australia, op. cit.*, p. 55.

depressiveness, for example. To these we can add Page's ambitious imagining of a how the formative Australian nation of the first half of the twentieth century should be shaped.

Page's ideas are hard to classify collectively using traditional concepts of liberalism, conservatism and socialism. He fiercely opposed public ownership but wanted government and business to work together. Primarily, he saw himself as an innovator, who only selectively defended established paradigms such as the possibilities of harnessing Imperial links. That he was so distinctive a visionary raises the question of why he held high office in a nation of supposed pragmatists. His personal resilience and stable support base around Grafton are just part of the explanation.

Despite the increasing divergences between them over time, Page endured mainly as the Country Party did. It gave him public status, aided by allied civic movements. His foremost political achievement of a coalition with the urban-based conservatives struck a long-term balance between a separate persona for the Country Party and its scope to influence the political mainstream, in contrast to the mixed fortunes of rural protest parties elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> The coalition also had indirect value to Page in that the senior partner tempered his impetuosity, especially under the leadership of Stanley Bruce. In the longer term, the success of the coalition contributed to a personal prestige that for Page largely survived growing policy differences with his peers.<sup>11</sup>

Also integral to Page's endurance were his political skills. He drew on his national standing and sense of strategy to defend the coalition and outshine potential rivals such as Charles Hardy. He remained cannily alert to opportunities to promote his agenda. This made Page's insertion of ideas into the political process spasmodic. Yet such studied opportunism – his attempts to seize the psychological moment – is hardly uncommon in politics: the

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<sup>10</sup> See chapter 1 of Graham, *op. cit.*, for a summary history of early twentieth century agrarian political movements, especially in the United States and Canada.

<sup>11</sup> Graham, *ibid.*, also reflects on the importance of the coalition to the Country Party and Page's role in its success, pp. 195, 295.

political journalist Henry Fairlie famously wrote of “the patience of politics.”<sup>12</sup> Page could wait for decades, but once set on an outcome was relentless.

Page was active for so long that he was exposed to major changes in political culture. After the relatively ready optimism of his early career and first stint in government during the 1920s, the dwindling of policy-makers’ faith in developmentalism was compounded by new economic theories and modes of governance. His career thus also contributes to understanding the impact of the technical economic and professional expertise that redefined the reach of central government. The optimism of the 1920s faltered as that decade progressed and was then sidelined by the search for responses to the economic crisis of the Great Depression. This contributed to the rise of economic expertise that became central to the development of national policy and was harnessed to the resurgent optimism of the immediate post-war years. But as economic prosperity took hold, mainstream policy settings shifted by the early 1950s to more limited ambitions of managing steady growth, rather than trying to spark the comprehensive economic and social engineering that Page continued to advocate.

Nor did Page accept the de-radicalisation of his own Country Party, becoming the foremost critic of the narrowing of its focus onto defending rural incomes. He clung so tenaciously to his goals that he drifted towards marginalisation, something this ever-hopeful individual never accepted. Although Page held a high position in the party’s organisation until his death, from the late 1930s he had only a handful of colleagues to whom he could relate on matters of policy. Generational change further eroded his personal political standing.

Page also had personal limitations. Ellis’s descriptions of endearing strengths read also as shortcomings, such as his calling Page “a crusader” without also noting the crusader’s typical righteous inflexibility.<sup>13</sup> Outwardly, Page bears a similarity to the “agitator” category in Harold Laswell’s political typology.

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<sup>12</sup> Henry Fairlie, *The Life of Politics*, Methuen, London, 1968, p. 84. Fairlie said that the phrase originated with R.A. Butler.

<sup>13</sup> Ellis, *A Pen in Politics*, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

Characteristics include trust in general principles and abstract rationality; frustration over administrative detail; provocativeness; self-reliance; contentiousness; suspicion that opponents act out of bad faith; outspokenness; and idealisation of what social reforms will achieve.<sup>14</sup> Such similarities reflect Page's commitment to his vision of the nation and corresponding anger over the barriers he encountered.

Page assumed that his policy goals were of themselves so compellingly rational that he frequently failed to argue as persuasively as someone of his intelligence was capable. He never convincingly detailed how planning would work, why private investors would fund hydroelectric dams, or how regionalism could be reconciled with his instinctive centralism. As Bruce discovered, Page was not good at selling an idea, no small problem for someone with so big an agenda. Page was more likely to suddenly impose a goal when the time seemed right than slowly build support. He interacted with civic and political groups selectively and had too diverse a range of interests to secure broad backing. Australia in his time was open to incremental change, but less so to sudden realignments. Tellingly, Page became sensitive to accusations of achieving less than he ought to have.<sup>15</sup>

His successes and also his failures suggest how difficult it has been in Australian public life to win support for a seemingly abstract vision of the entire nation, as against immediately pragmatic answers to specific issues. State-Commonwealth relations remain uncertain, with Page's contribution to the rise of Commonwealth power not being matched by an agreed commensurate shift in constitutional responsibilities away from the states. Tensions between countryside and city over the allocation of public resources have not been resolved by limited experiments in regionalism that reflect Page's ideas but which fall far short of his concept of nation-shaping federal units. Page's National Council and other planning proposals demonstrate the difficulty of

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<sup>14</sup> Laswell's typology is summarized in Graham Little, *Politics and Personal Style*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1973, pp. 77-8. Page did not, however, share one other agitator trait, that of eliciting an emotional public response: he preferred to appeal to reason.

<sup>15</sup> For example, his angry exchange with the Labor Member for Adelaide, Cyril Chambers, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 22 May 1956, p. 2324.

implementing a coherent national economic policy in an unresolved federal system.

Yet as Australia's most significant developmentalist, Page still helps draw out currents of thought. His career supports revisionist arguments by James Walter and others that Australian political life was richer in ideas than often assumed, especially those promulgated by applied thinkers. He was a powerful exception to the "Australian scepticism" identified by the sociologist John Carroll as a national trait, in which "there are no grand visions of the past, the present, or the future" and no "convinced belief that mundane institutions...can be radically transformed for the better, that idealistic passion can be translated into social progress."<sup>16</sup>

Page's developmentalism helps enlarge our understanding of what ideas define Australian civilization. There is a widespread assumption that Australia reached a broad political consensus about 1910 based on the Deakinite vision, and that subsequent debate predominantly concerned its implementation.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Page provided a spatially-oriented developmentalist alternative, which qualifies perceptions of the Country Party as predominantly a party of resistance.<sup>18</sup> He affirms the endurance of the tradition created by European settlers that they could make much of a continent they saw as bearing no great burden of history and as having no previous owners of the land. Inspired by admiration of overseas development experience as he frequently was, Page's efforts to create an Australia according to his national vision amounted to a form of national pride.

Page thus shows how assessment of the career of an influential individual and the ideas they upheld can help illuminate the wider past and also cast light on the present. He is an example of the historical value of querying assumptions that prominent yet little studied national figures were merely reflective of the

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<sup>16</sup> John Carroll, 'National Identity' in Carroll (ed.), *Intruders in the Bush*, *op. cit.*, pp. 211, 214, 215.

<sup>17</sup> See for example Geoff Stokes (ed.), *Australian Political Ideas*, UNSW Press, Kensington, 1994, p. 6; and Paul Kelly, *The End of Certainty: the Story of the 1980s*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, 1992, introduction.

<sup>18</sup> See for example W.K. Hancock, *Australia*, *op. cit.*, chapter 11, especially pp. 198-203.

institutions in which they embedded themselves. An important minority of political figures such as Page ranged so widely in thought and vision that the study of their interactions with wider public culture can broaden interpretations of Australian history.

Page's strategic place in Australian history is that he offered a full alternative to the Deakinite settlement which, as the century progressed, became the established mainstream of Australian government policy. No-one else of his political standing provided such a comprehensive alternative for so long. As ready faith in the nation's development narrowed to a predominantly popular ideal that was overshadowed by the management of steady growth, Page was increasingly lonely as one of the very few developmentalist optimists left in national politics.

In sum, Earle Page is historically important as Australian developmentalism's foremost standard bearer. He broadened developmentalist thought by providing a rare synthesis of ideas that were otherwise typically seen with only limited regard for how they could strengthen each other. This both delineated and stretched the breadth of what visions and policies were acceptable in Australian politics. He was instrumental in giving elements of his vision, especially regionalism, co-operative federalism and a strong national government, greater and more lasting significance in Australian history than they would otherwise have had. Page's long career confirms that Australia has long inspired popular ideals of national development. Studying his life establishes his place in Australian history and, through this, contributes to establishing that of Australian developmentalism as a persistent ideal in public life but which as a practical concept was increasingly challenged during the twentieth-century.

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