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## THE USE OF POWER

### Treasurer Page Pursues His National Vision

Page took his place in 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 practise as a surgeon: just three months after being sworn in as treasurer, Page was reported to have operated on his brother James, then headmaster of a public school near Maitland.<sup>1</sup> Shortly before the 1928 election, he drew nationwide headlines for performing an emergency appendectomy on the Labor Member for Hume ('Doctor Fights for Life of Political Foe: Canberra Drama').<sup>2</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>3</sup>

Page signalled his intent to shape Australia by using his new status as a senior minister to pursue personal visions in three related policy areas: hydroelectricity, new states and rural roads. In each, the change he sought went well beyond what was proposed by most other rural-based civic movements and advocates, including those in his own Country Party. This made him a major influence on what policy ideas were current.

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1 *Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder*, 11 May 1923, p. 2.

2 *Melbourne Herald*, 18 September 1928, p. 1.

3 *Farmers' Advocate*, 28 September 1923, p. 3.

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 has a degree of validity; its leader's vision, however, was far broader indeed.<sup>4</sup>

## Page's vision of hydroelectricity

Geoff Page wrote in his poem 'The River' of his grandfather Earle 'dreaming of the Gorge' – 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>5</sup> Electrification was the most pronounced manifestation of Earle Page's faith in 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 regional harnessing of river systems by local 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 fascination with hydroelectricity drew on his trips to New Zealand in 1910 and to North America in 1917. He became the foremost Australian devotee of the most cogent technological cultural phenomenon of this time: faith in the socially transformative power of electricity, or 'electrical triumphalism'.<sup>6</sup>

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4 Quote from L.L. Robson, *Australia in the Nineteen Twenties: Commentary and Documents*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1980, p. 70.

5 Geoff Page, 'The River', *Collected Lives*, Angus and Robertson, North Ryde, NSW, 1986, pp. 45–58.

6 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.

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 onwards. Yet Page only occasionally used the exultant rhetoric of American and European technological visionaries or their metaphors of a higher cause of conquering nature. One historian of technology described this as 'an essentially religious feeling' that sought 'to reinvest the landscape and the works of man with transcendent significance'.<sup>7</sup> Page was far more focused on immediate practical benefits.

Page's perception of these benefits differed from such other Australian hydroengineering enthusiasts as the engineers William Corin and John Bradfield by stressing electricity more than irrigation or flood control. Although these latter applications were not unimportant to him, hailing as he did from a flood-prone region, his main interest in 'water conservation' was the potential of hydroelectricity to power his social and economic vision. This went well beyond easing 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 by supporting social amenities. Hydroelectricity flowed through most elements of his distinctive approach to development – local autonomy, transformative technologies, planning, cooperative federalism, franchises for foreign investors and enshrinement in the Constitution.

Electrification and hydroelectricity also provide evidence of Page's trait 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

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7 Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, p. xiii.

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.

Although Page first became interested in hydroelectricity in the early 1910s, his ideas about its application only reached a settled form a decade later, when he 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 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.<sup>8</sup>

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>9</sup> One of the main barriers was centralisation. 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>10</sup> Page's vision was to use electricity as a 'potent decentraliser' to help create a more productive and united Australia that was decentralised yet efficient, ordered yet egalitarian.<sup>11</sup>

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8 *Daily Examiner*, 14 April 1922, p. 3.

9 *Ibid.*

10 'Power Production', 1925, EPP, folder 2088; unsigned but format and characteristic references to the Clarence River and North American exemplars indicate that it was prepared by Page and apparently for Cabinet.

11 Notes for speech 'Electrical Standards', no date but c. 1925, EPP, folder 1053.

## The Nymboida and Jackadgery: Page and regional hydroelectricity

During his 1917 travels, Page was greatly impressed by how electrification was managed in Ontario and British Columbia. In a 1919 booklet produced through the North Coast Development League, *The Clarence Gorge Hydro-Electric Scheme*, he presented the Ontario Hydro-Electric Power Commission as a model for regional control of power production and evidence of the transformative power of regionalism. Page reported that it 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> He concluded that the commission had ‘secured intelligent and harmonious co-operation among local bodies’ and ‘developed a national outlook throughout the whole area’. 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>13</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 industries.<sup>14</sup> His interest was reinforced by rapid development in electricity use in Australia. The 1920s saw a fourfold increase in Australian electricity consumption, faster than most other countries (but similar to Canada). By 1927, mainland Australia’s electricity production of about 300 kWh per capita was approximately half as big again as Britain’s.<sup>15</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

12 North Coast Development League for the Grafton Chamber of Commerce, *The Clarence Gorge Hydro-Electric Scheme: Harnessing 100,000 Horse-Power*, The League, Grafton, NSW, 1919, pp. 35–43.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 54, 58.

14 E. Parry, ‘The economics of electric-power distribution’, *New Zealand Journal of Science and Technology*, vol. 1, January 1918, pp. 49–55. Page’s copy is at EPP, folder 1762.

15 There is contemporary evidence that Australia lagged behind the United States and Canada in the production and industrial use of electricity, but the picture becomes more mixed if European nations and Tasmania are also considered: See H.R. Harper, ‘Presidential Address’, *The Journal of the Institution of Engineers, Australia*, vol. 6, no. 2, February 1934, p. 86.

hydroelectricity, it proceeded to aggressively exploit Gippsland's brown coal reserves. There was also a jump in the local manufacture of electrical goods, albeit mostly consumer items produced by foreign subsidiaries while most more complex manufactures continued to be 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.

Page in the early 1920s drew on the status of office, his local prestige as the Clarence 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; the planning of power utilisation by a national commission that would begin its task by surveying Australia's water resources; and greater efficiency via the 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 project. Widely considered a triumph at the time, Page saw it as just an encouraging first step for the wider Clarence and the nation.

Page's efforts on the Nymboida centred on the regional control and low charges that had so impressed him in Canada. In 1912, W.J. Mulligan had drawn attention to the electricity potential of the Nymboida, 'which he had raised some years previously', and two years later forwarded a proposal to the Grafton and South Grafton councils.<sup>16</sup> This led to a conference of the two councils in April 1914 that involved Page in his capacity as an alderman of South Grafton. The councils duly carried Page's motion to ask the state government to undertake an assessment of the Nymboida for power generation. But, as with parallel efforts to harness The Gorge, little of substance happened until Page's return from the war, when he used his positions as vice-chairman of the Lighting Committee of South Grafton Council and subsequently as mayor to revive the idea.

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16 This and most following details on the origins of the Nymboida project are based on 'Story of hard fight for modern methods: Genesis of Nymboida scheme', *Daily Examiner*, 2 November 1938, p. 41; North Coast Development League, *The Clarence Gorge Hydro-Electric Scheme: Harnessing 100,000 Horse-Power*; Ulrich Ellis, 'The Story of Nymboida, notes for Sir Earle Page', 12 December 1952, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 3, folder 34; and an undated document in EPP, folder 1855, p. 23, evidently prepared for the drafting of *Truant Surgeon*.

In December 1918, Corin produced a more ambitious plan for the Nymboida and The Gorge than his vision of 1915. He pointedly commented that to meet the power needs of the Grafton neighbourhood the Nymboida alone would do, but if the goal was to develop new industries then The Gorge must also be harnessed. In February 1919 Page convened a meeting in Grafton of councils from the Clarence and Richmond regions to promote the plan, telling them that the Nymboida was not an alternative but a preliminary to The Gorge as part of the wider development of the Clarence. In December the state parliament legislated for hydroelectric works at the Nymboida, at Burrinjuck and on the Tumut River and its tributaries. But little came of this and so Page continued lobbying along with his valued local supporters Roy Vincent, a state MLA from 1922, and Alf Pollack. Pollack became general secretary of the Northern New South Wales Separation League and of the Joint Electricity Committee of Northern Municipalities and Shires, and was Country Party MLA for Clarence over the period 1927–31. They lobbied for the creation of a confederation of local councils to form a county council with powers approximating those of the Ontario Commission, including to raise money and manage electricity production. Page later claimed that the state government acted only after he publicised its delays. The Clarence River County Council (CRCC) was duly proclaimed in May 1922.

A contract was finally let early in 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 5, that Page keenly supported. Treasurer Page featured on the cover of the printed program for the ‘switching on’ ceremony of 26 November 1924 as ‘The Father of the Scheme’.<sup>17</sup> The project marked the success of his strategy of using his influence over local governments in his home region to forge a united approach to the state government. The CRCC and the Richmond River County Council amalgamated in 1952 to form the Northern Rivers County Council, later described as occupying ‘pride of place in rural electrical enterprise’ in the state.<sup>18</sup>

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17 Booklet commemorating the switching on, dated 26 November 1924, 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.

18 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, p. 28.

The Nymboida project became the template for Page's concept of the electrification of Australia, especially the localisation of control. Even before generation commenced, Page announced his hope that the Nymboida scheme 'might prove a turning point in the history of Australia'.<sup>19</sup> He often recalled how he and Pollack had 'induced nearly sixty councils to combine for the gradual harnessing of the Clarence waters for power', thereby providing a 'shining example of what can be done with electricity'.<sup>20</sup> One of the most important issues in electricity use is price setting and its impact on consumption. Fundamental to electrification, Page-style, was a common flat rate subsidised by the taxpayer. Although contrary to most tenets of commercial sustainability, this would 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>21</sup> On switching-on day, 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 sadly 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>22</sup> Page even called his Sydney home Nymboida.<sup>23</sup>

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>24</sup> Page set out to create

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19 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 September 1923, p. 8.

20 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.

21 'Dr. Earle Page's Prescription for National Health and Development', February 1946, EPP, folder 2295.

22 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, EPP, folder 1046, pp. 21, 26.

23 Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 7, folder 62.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

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 encompassing Casino, Inverell, Grafton, Byron, Tweed and other local governments. The *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>25</sup> A much more ambitious project than the Nymboida, Jackadgery fell foul of changes of state government from Fuller's Nationalists to Jack Lang's Labor in June 1925, and in October 1927 to T.R. Bavin's Nationalists.<sup>26</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 policy coordination that they presented to the May 1923 Premiers' Conference included a strategy for national electrification, the first of a long series of Page-inspired overtures to the states to join him in shaping the economic and social landscape. But Australia's small population, distances between population centres, and interstate rivalries worked against planned electrification and in favour of the absence of ultimate national purpose that Page so abhorred.

National organisation and standardisation were widely recognised as important for electrification. Standardisation was a major issue for the United States electrical industry throughout the 1910s and 1920s as part of a wider standardisation movement. In Britain, it was known that the division of generation between local governments hampered nationwide electrification. In Australia, Page attempted to take the lead by using his status in the Bruce–Page Government as a powerful platform for appeals to the Australian public and state governments, on a scale quite unlike his

25 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, A180, box 6, folder 57.

26 See for example a letter from The Port of the Clarence Advisory Board to Premier Bavin, 16 February 1928, in NAA, CP211/2, 34/13.

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.

Since the Commonwealth lacked a direct constitutional role in power generation, Page added to the Bruce–Page Government's advocacy of cooperative federalism the Commonwealth-led coordination of a national power grid implemented by the states. At the May 1923 Premiers' Conference he exhorted state power ministers to accept this approach, assuring 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>27</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 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>28</sup>

During the conference debate Page at first tried to be tactful, carefully presenting the Clarence as merely one of several potential power centres. But state ministers still 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. 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'.

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27 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 142.

28 This and following comments are from the official report of the conference, 'Standardisation of Electrical Power Schemes', pp. 71–9, EPP, folder 1045.

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 share information on their respective state’s power resources and to work with a new advisory board on standardisation.

This was a prominent early instance of Page seriously misreading state governments, and a formative encounter with their sensitivity to any loss 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 had openly disdained.

Page continued to press for the planning and standardisation of national electrification by whatever other channels seemed available. This was typical, means never being as important as his grand ends. The Bruce–Page Government was very receptive to policy advice from industry leaders, including in electricity. The year after the unsuccessful premiers’ conference, it readily agreed when the Australian Commonwealth Engineering Standards Association, a semi-private body that advised the Commonwealth and state governments, 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. 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>29</sup> Although Page later held this up as

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29 ‘Opening Remarks’ by Chairman of the National Committee of Australia of the Australian Commonwealth Engineering Standards Association, 6 May 1924, EPP, folder 1053; *Quarterly Bulletin*, The Institution of Engineers, Australia, Sydney, April 1924, p. 51.

an outstanding example of industry-led national coordination, it never amounted to effective national planning of electrification.<sup>30</sup> In 1925, he proposed to Cabinet the revival of his idea for a national electricity body.<sup>31</sup> In July that year he directly contacted the SEC to propose that if the state government legislated on standards for voltage and frequency, the Commonwealth would 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>32</sup>

## **New states: Star witness before 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, without the support of 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 very 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 helped to ensure its survival.

Although Bruce supported new states in principle, his new government signalled caution by affirming Hughes's constitutionally correct line that they needed to be initiated by existing state governments. Bruxner's successful 1922 resolution in the New South Wales Parliament elicited the very proper response from the prime minister that he would not act until the state government came up with a solid proposal – a factor in the subsequent appointment of the Cohen Royal Commission.<sup>33</sup>

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30 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, pp. 142–5.

31 'Power Production', EPP, folder 2088.

32 H.R. Harper to Page, 27 July 1925, EPP, folder 1053.

33 Aitkin, *The Colonel*, pp. 78–9; also Ellis, *New Australian States*, pp.168–9.

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>34</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. 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>35</sup>

High ministerial office inhibited Page because of the tension new states raised with his coalition partners. 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>36</sup> As his foremost means of implementing a pressing agenda to improve rural living standards, Page needed to make the coalition work. He had limited opportunity, especially at first, for the luxury of focusing on a personally favoured issue like new states. Calls to provide 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>37</sup>

So Page made a strategic judgement that the time was not yet ripe for his new state–regionalist agenda. His caution drew criticism, such as in parliament in July 1926 from Frank Forde, a Queensland Labor new stater,

34 Ellis, *New Australian States*, p. 176.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 166, 181–2; Graham, *Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, p. 231.

36 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 111; Ellis, *New Australian States*, pp. 199–200.

37 Page at the opening of the Wireless and Electrical Exhibition, Sydney, 3 December 1923, quoted in Sally Warhaft (ed.), *Well May We Say...: The Speeches That Made Australia*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2004, p. 540, originally reported in *Radio*, 12 December 1923.

and Hughes, still with a personal score to settle.<sup>38</sup> But Page was prepared to momentarily re-enter the new state fray when a singularly promising opportunity suddenly materialised at the state government level. The 1924–25 Cohen Royal Commission was 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, Page and the other new staters put enormous effort into trying to win over the royal commission, and, by extension, the government of New South Wales. As a willing witness, Treasurer Page resumed his persona as an unconventional nation-shaper to produce the fullest case for new states yet seen.

A royal commission into new states 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 a coalition, but whose support in parliament now kept the Nationalists in office – that in December Fuller agreed to review this decision. Late in 1923 he acceded to Bruxner's request for a royal commission 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>39</sup> Crucially, the Cohen Royal Commission had a very wide brief that included assessing the fundamental question of whether new states in New South Wales were 'practical and desirable' and 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, councillors, farmers and state government officials. Page was the new state movement's star witness, the foremost national advocate of the allied concepts of new states, regionalism and decentralisation. He was not queried when he described himself to the royal commission as 'leader of the general movement for Australian subdivision'.<sup>40</sup> Page's evidence was

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38 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 24 June 1926, pp. 3481–8 and 3492–4.

39 Aitkin, *The Colonel*, pp. 76, 78–9.

40 Page, *The New State in Northern New South Wales*, p. 1. This is the published version of Page's Cohen evidence.

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 19–20 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’. 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 regions could encourage manufacturing far more effectively than would tariff protection.<sup>41</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>42</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>43</sup> Page frequently held up Victoria as being of the approved 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. 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

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41 Ibid., pp. 1, 2, 7.

42 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.

43 Page, *The New State in Northern New South Wales*, pp. 1, 6.

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>44</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'. 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>45</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>46</sup> In his second bout with the royal commission, 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. Treasury's estimate reflected the 'unnecessary circumlocution and consequent grave overstaffing' that characterised the existing New South Wales public service, not the slimmer apparatus Page envisaged.<sup>47</sup>

Page's 'advanced text-book of Constitutional reform', as Ellis described his evidence, attracted press attention in both city and rural newspapers.<sup>48</sup> Yet Page and his fellow advocates made a poor impression on the royal commission. The commissioners looked carefully and critically at the new state case 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>49</sup> They were not at all persuaded by data supposedly demonstrating that new states stimulated

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44 Ibid., pp. 19–22, 29.

45 Ibid., pp. 3, 8.

46 These figures are taken from Royal Commission of Inquiry into Proposals for the Establishment of a New State or New States, *Evidence*, volume 3, 1925, 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.

47 Royal Commission of Inquiry into Proposals for the Establishment of a New State or New States, *Evidence*, volume 4, 1925, p. 2173.

48 Ellis, *New Australian States*, p. 195. For press coverage see, for example, *The Land*, 23 May 1924, p. 5; and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 May 1924, p. 5, and 22 November 1924, p. 16.

49 Quoted in Ellis, *New Australian States*, p. 195.

population growth. New state witnesses had, for example, pointed to the rapid growth of the American state of Iowa without realising that much of this actually pre-dated its statehood.

The royal commission found that new states would actually increase the cost of government and that the alleged benefits of decentralisation could be obtained by less irrevocable 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. 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>50</sup>

The royal commission findings dampened new state agitation until another trigger arose when the economy deteriorated in the late 1920s. Although the royal commission 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 reform of administration and the strengthening of local government to address what it considered to be the actual problem facing rural New South Wales – the centralisation of public works and social services. 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). The royal commission also recommended that the state government resolve some specific grievances, notably the Northern Tablelands–north coast railway.

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50 Ibid., p. 160.

Page's criticisms of the Cohen Royal Commission's findings drew on 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>51</sup> Page cast the royal commission as having instead adopted a provincial New South Wales outlook, hence such conclusions as that unified nationwide railway gauges would disadvantage Sydney.<sup>52</sup> Even at this still early stage of his political career, Page saw himself as habitually battling blinkered outlooks. He may not have won the royal commission over, but the attention he attracted had enhanced the status of the new state movement when it could otherwise have faded for good in the face of the royal commission's withering criticisms – 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 proudly depicted Page on the cover as 'Treasurer of the Commonwealth'.<sup>53</sup> Page's effort to impress the royal commission 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>54</sup>

Page also contrived to interpret the royal commission's support for the localisation of administration as amounting to endorsement 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 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>55</sup>

Immediately after the royal commission, however, Page reverted to a watchful passivity on new states, consistent with his habitual preparedness to await the psychological moment. His Country Party policy speech for the 1925 election made but the briefest of references to new states

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51 Comments by Page on Cohen's findings, New England New State Movement, Armidale, UNE Archives, A1, box 14.

52 Ellis, *New Australian States*, p. 198.

53 Page, *The New State in Northern New South Wales*.

54 Graham, *Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, pp. 231–2, 283–4.

55 Comments by Page on Cohen's findings, UNE Archives, A1, box 14.

and planned development.<sup>56</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. (There had been two earlier Nationalist–Progressive governments, one of which lasted only a day.) It commenced new public works in the north, notably the Armidale Teachers’ College and the Guyra–Dorrigo railway. The effectiveness with which these very visible projects deflated new state agitation says much about the shallowness of public support for the cause. Page’s 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 1923, George Pearce, minister for home and territories, proposed new federal territories of Northern and Central Australia, with parts of Western Australia and Queensland to be included if their governments agreed. In 1926 the Commonwealth responded to recommendations of the Royal Commission on Western Australian Disabilities Under Federation by proposing to annex the state’s territory north of the 26th parallel. (The 1910s and 1920s were the high point of Commonwealth use of royal commissions as a means of addressing difficult policy issues: 56 Commonwealth royal commissions were held from 1911 to 1929, but after that only 10 up to the early 1970s.) 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 10 years, from which a new state could be created. Page later commented that at 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

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56 1925 Country Party policy speech, EPP folder 2331.

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>57</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 'States of the Commonwealth'.<sup>58</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 the construction of 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 led to his imposing these grants on the states.

Page was motivated by his regionalist vision and long-standing commitment to improved rural roads. He recalled vividly 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>59</sup> Commonwealth-tied grants for roads did not entirely 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 that would improve market access by soldier settlers. This was a historic step in Commonwealth–state financial relations, yet the parliamentary

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57 Ellis, *New Australian States*, pp. 185–6, 266–8; Earle Page, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 12 October 1961, p. 1985.

58 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 10 February 1926, p. 824.

59 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 146.

debate on the legislation – a wide-ranging Act on the expenditure of Commonwealth loans – barely addressed these *inter alia* grants.<sup>60</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. The 1923 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' included specifying end uses. 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 30 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>61</sup> As such, this constitutes an important part of Page's legacy.

Tied grants for roads were first mooted at the Premiers' Conference of May 1923, leading to the *Main Roads Development Act 1923*. 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>62</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. During his 1925 trip to the United

60 Bureau of Transport Economics, *Road Grants Legislation in Australia: Commonwealth Government Involvement, 1900–1981*, Bureau of Transport Economics Occasional Paper no. 48, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1981, p. 5. The legislation was the *Loan Act 1922*.

61 Mathews and Jay, *Federal Finance*, pp. 98–9. Page's *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry states that he acquired the idea of tied grants from the Royal Commission on Taxation.

62 Draft agenda paper 'Proposed National Main Road Development', in NAA, CP103/11, 818.

States and Canada he had studied federal and local government road policies, and on his return proposed the creation of a new federal highways commission of senior Commonwealth and state engineers to plan out a national road network, and for it to be empowered to apportion monies for works accordingly.<sup>63</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>64</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.

The result was the *Federal Aid Roads Act 1926* (1926 Act). This was widely recognised as having quite different implications for federal–state relations than previous legislation. It allocated £2 million annually to the states for an unprecedented 10-year period and imposed 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>65</sup> It was not only opposed by oil companies but also was the subject of unsuccessful legal challenges by Victoria and South Australia that eventually reached the Privy Council. (A young Robert Menzies appeared as a counsel for Victoria. He argued that section 96 referred only to the strictly financial terms of Commonwealth grants to the states and was not intended to effectively broaden Commonwealth powers. Menzies did not deign to mention Page in his published account of the origins of tied grants.)<sup>66</sup>

The importance of this legislation to Page is reflected in his vitriolic ripostes to criticism from the oil companies, calling them 'monopolistic foreign importing interests' bent on 'the scotching of any development whatever

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63 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 147; 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.

64 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 148; see also draft of this part of *Truant Surgeon*, 'National Transport System', at EPP, folder 1857.

65 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 6 August 1926, p. 5030.

66 See Robert Menzies, *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.

in the Commonwealth that will tend to make us more independent of them'.<sup>67</sup> The government's justification remained simple. The Minister for Works and 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>68</sup>

The 1926 Act's funding was mostly for rural roads, including 'main roads which open up and develop new country'.<sup>69</sup> Following the American example, the Commonwealth imposed detailed specifications for road construction. 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. Page's powerful federal highways commission did not come to pass, 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.

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>70</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>71</sup> Despite the challenges from the states, Page did not see himself as using the roads 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>72</sup>

67 Draft speech by Page, undated, c. 1926, EPP, folder 417.

68 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 27 July 1926, p. 4590.

69 Section 5 of the *Federal Aid Roads Act 1926*.

70 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 30 June 1937, p. 753.

71 'Local Government Enquiry Commencing at Grafton on 10th September 1956 on Proposed Redivision of Local Government Boundaries – Evidence of Sir Earle Page, MP', EPP, folder 1798.

72 'Memorandum on Federal Aid Roads', an undated history of road funding prepared by or for Page, c. 1947, EPP, folder 2577.

There is support for Page's claims of a decisive personal role in these early tied grants. 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>73</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 on the Commonwealth's then forthcoming legislation, 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>74</sup> (The Bruce Highway in Queensland is, incidentally, named not for Stanley Bruce but for one Henry Adam Bruce, a Labor state and federal parliamentarian.)

Tied grants eventually became a staple of Commonwealth–state financial relations that to this day enable the Commonwealth to use its 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 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>75</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. The bridge was completed in 1932, well after the Bruce–Page

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73 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.

74 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*, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/kemp-sir-john-robert-10717/text18987, published first in hardcopy volume 15, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 2000.

75 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 22 May 1956, pp. 2321, 2322.

Government had lost office. Page used Commonwealth funding to do much for his electorate, including legislation in 1924 for the Grafton to Brisbane rail line and the sealing of the road from Grafton to the coast.

Page never saw himself as being absolutely bound by obligations to the governments in which he served. Bruce 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, then and always his ultimate interest.

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