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## GOVERNMENT AND PARTY

### The Basis of Page's Power

Page's standing as the second most senior minister in the Bruce–Page Government and leader of the Country Party was central to his ability to pursue his developmentalist agenda. Page the personality was a singular holder of high office, and the dynamics and priorities of government and party provided him with both confidence and opportunity. His 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 critically important: 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 conspicuously 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

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1 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 326.

vision. Jack Lang recalled how as a newly elected premier of New South Wales in 1925 he was the subject of 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, hardly a shrinking violet, was affronted that Page 'was lecturing me as if I was a young medical student'.<sup>2</sup> Page's high standing in the Bruce–Page Government lent him to expect 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 oriented to process and administration, as against substantive policy. Page's personal papers and official records 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>3</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 were at risk of termination by a sudden Page decision to break for a game of tennis or a nap on his office couch.<sup>4</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>5</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 preferred 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, 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 was bound to win

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2 Jack Lang, *I Remember: Autobiography*, McNamara's Books, Katoomba, NSW, 1980 (first published 1956), p. 239.

3 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 116. The other was James Heathershaw.

4 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, pp. 326–7.

5 Green, *Servant of the House*, p. 103.

their support. This attitude survived repeated disappointments that would have discouraged a less persistent individual. By contrast, Page made few attempts to reach out to organised labour.

His attraction to robust business leaders was leavened by ongoing dalliances with progressive intellectual figures such as Griffith Taylor and the pioneering sociologist C.H. Northcott. Page's sporadic dealings 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 their shared interest in population distribution and a proposed expert commission to assess new legislation.<sup>6</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. Page interpreted this authoritative text very liberally and highlighted in his personal copy its passages on assistance to farmers and hydroelectricity. He found Broderick especially handy for making the case that new states would of themselves spark development. Page was still referencing Broderick as late as his April 1957 speech to the Country Party Annual Conference.<sup>7</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 economic planning, coordination between levels of government and the selective nurturing of industries – not efficiency as imposed by rule of the free market.<sup>8</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>9</sup>

6 See Northcott's farewell letter to Page, 5 September 1928, as he returned to England, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 10, folder 80.

7 John Joyce Broderick, *Report on the Economic, Financial and Industrial Conditions of the United States of America in 1922*, Department of Overseas Trade, HMSO, London, 1923; see Page's copy and his April 1957 speech at EPP, folders 2723 and 2607 respectively.

8 Quote from Michael Roe, *Nine Australian Progressives: Vitalism in Bourgeois Social Thought 1890–1960*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld, 1984, p. 11.

9 Editorial in the *Adelaide Register* of 22 June 1926, p. 8.

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, amid his harrying of the Hughes Government, he shared with Ethel his despair that politics brought out 'the lowest in human nature'. Amid 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>10</sup> Such dark reflections were to reappear 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>11</sup> Yet even on this trip Page immersed himself in United States and Canadian development policy and so returned home brimming with ideas concerning 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. Although the 1920s was a decade of widespread optimism about Australian development, the shared determination of Bruce and Page was needed to translate this into policy. These two inexperienced party leaders did not move as stealthily as has sometimes been claimed. From the outset they tried to alter fundamentals, strongly signalled by the comprehensive overhaul of federalism that they proposed at the 1923 Premiers' Conference just three months after coming to office. Staley and Nethercote, in their account of Australian liberalism, considered Bruce and Page to have headed a government of 'active interventionism'.<sup>12</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

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10 Page to Ethel Page, 13 August 1922, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 9, folder 71.

11 *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.

12 A.A. Staley and J.R. Nethercote, 'Liberalism and the Australian Federation', in J.R. Nethercote (ed.), *Liberalism and the Australian Federation*, The Federation Press, Leichhardt, NSW, 2001, p. 8; see also in this source Nethercote, 'Liberalism, Nationalism and Coalition 1910–29', especially pp. 128–33.

financial relations and, later in the decade, through promoting economic planning. 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' celebrates the alacrity with which he and Bruce sought to reorganise the nation to developmentalist ends.<sup>13</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>14</sup> Page thought that his working relationship with Bruce had been '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>15</sup> He recalled that '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>16</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>17</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 that in return provided foodstuffs, raw materials

13 'Australian Country Party Complimentary Dinner to Sir Earle Page', EPP, folder 2358.

14 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 100.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

16 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 101.

17 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.

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>18</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 from 1925 to 1926 that heralded the Great Depression.<sup>19</sup>

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>20</sup> He also accepted 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 than by reliance on continued government support. Like Page, Bruce was more interested in improving efficiency than in protecting rural producers through orderly marketing.<sup>21</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 exactly 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>22</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>23</sup> He and Page shared a lack of faith in the capacity of established government departments to implement developmentalist strategy. They instead tried

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18 'Australian Country Party Complimentary Dinner to Sir Earle Page', EPP, folder 2358.

19 Butlin, Barnard and Pincus, *Government and Capitalism*, pp. 77–80.

20 Richmond, 'S.M. Bruce and Australian economic policy', pp. 238–40, 256.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 244–6.

22 Ellis, *New Australian States*, pp. 168–9.

23 Quoted in Judith Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class: From Alfred Deakin to John Howard*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 80.

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. This included the 1926 creation of the CSIR, Australia's first effective national science agency, chaired by the mechanical engineer George Julius. Bruce's speech to parliament on the legislation for this was a fine encapsulation of his commitment to national coordination and efficiency. His objective was 'not to create a great new centralised institute of research, but, for the benefit of both the primary and secondary industries, to bring about cooperation between existing agencies and to enlist the aid of the pure scientist, the universities, and every other agency at present handling scientific questions'. The CSIR was to be structured so as to involve the states and avoid duplication with them. Like Page, Bruce was impressed by the United States, and hoped Australian could emulate its business culture where 'individual employers are expending vast sums of money in attempts to improve their methods and generally to advance their efficiency'.<sup>24</sup> Page attributed his own strong support for the CSIR to 'my country background and scientific training'.<sup>25</sup>

The Bruce–Page Government also established, at about the same time, the Development and Migration Commission. This planning and advisory body was to reinforce efficiency and population growth by guiding the placement of the greatest number of migrants on the land at the lowest cost.<sup>26</sup> It was of great importance to Page and is described in more detail in the following chapter. Such strong commitment to 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 them to place national duty above politics. The Bruce–Page Government just before its fall also sought to create a bureau of economic research, which did not eventuate.

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 supported private control of the main means of production, declaring himself during the 1922 election campaign in favour of

24 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 26 May 1926, p. 2330.

25 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 138.

26 Richmond, 'S.M. Bruce and Australian economic policy', p. 247.

'the strictest limitation of Government enterprise to developmental works and public utilities'.<sup>27</sup> He preferred voluntary commissions to compulsory arbitration, and producer-led voluntary cooperative pools over compulsory government-managed arrangements. As treasurer, 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>28</sup> Yet, as Page saw himself as more practical than ideological, he had few qualms about simultaneously 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'. 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>29</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 recollection of Page's daily 'new brainwaves' that 'were nearly always half-baked' indicates wariness on his part.<sup>30</sup> He once told Robert Menzies that 'the working of Page's mind is still a complete mystery to me notwithstanding my very considerable experience of its vagaries'.<sup>31</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

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27 Melbourne *Argus*, 27 October 1922, p. 10.

28 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, pp. 108–11.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 172.

30 Quoted in Edwards, *Bruce of Melbourne*, p. 82.

31 Bruce to Menzies, 4 October 1939, quoted in Martin, *Robert Menzies: A Life, Volume 1*, p. 279.

‘courteous and dependable’ thereafter.<sup>32</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>33</sup> Hence Bruce’s practice of opening premiers’ conferences himself with long statements of intent that left Page with a subsidiary role in later debate.

Most historians correctly picture the Bruce–Page Government as a genuine partnership, but one led by Bruce. They were not equals in government. Page often initiated proposals, but Bruce retained final say. Bruce himself commented that regardless of the impression given in *Truant Surgeon* about who usually originated ideas, he was ‘not frightfully concerned which of the things we did originated with him or with me, because in the long run it was my responsibility’.<sup>34</sup> 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>35</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>36</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 final authority and issued guidance to his treasurer accordingly.<sup>37</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>38</sup>

32 Edwards, *The Editor Regrets*, p. 35.

33 Edwards, *Bruce of Melbourne*, p. 82.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

35 Peter Heydon, *Quiet Decision: A Study of George Foster Pearce*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1965, p. 94. See Edwards, *Bruce of Melbourne*, p. 82.

36 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 103–4.

37 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.

38 See Bruce to Page, 5 September 1926, EPP, folder 2368.

In recording the Bruce–Page Government's achievements, Ellis implied that most were 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 – creation of a federal department of agriculture, rural credits, a national health council, and tied grants for water and sewage in country towns (subsequently thwarted by the states) and for roads.<sup>39</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 that Page must share with Bruce. Nor did Ellis dwell on Page's inability to secure outcomes on 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 1923 faced periodic challenges from within both participating parties. Page withstood these by intervening decisively in potentially divisive internal Country Party debates on strategy.

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39 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, pp. 102–4.

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 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>40</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>41</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 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. Page told a party conference in Adelaide that it was no coincidence that Labor was in power in states that lacked a coalition.<sup>42</sup>

40 Graham, *Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, pp. 223–6.

41 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 174.

42 Port Pirie *Recorder*, 10 September 1924, p. 1.

His ability to see off challenges to his authority benefited fortuitously from sizeable budget surpluses from 1922–23 to 1924–25 arising from higher than anticipated customs and excise revenue during a rare inter-war period of buoyancy. Customs and excise constituted 66 per cent of total Commonwealth revenue in 1922–23 and over 70 per cent in 1924–25.<sup>43</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 also flourished 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.

More immediately, 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. The main point of contention that still could have ended the coalition – tariff policy – was left 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 the exports of high cost industries (such as dried and canned fruits); and Australian domestic parity prices for exports (notably dairy products). 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

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43 Graham, *Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, p. 230.

concessions reluctantly made to pressure groups, such as subsidisation of canned fruit exports.<sup>44</sup> By early 1928, the Commonwealth Department of Markets was administering 15 federal Acts and nine producer boards and similar entities.<sup>45</sup> The sole major agricultural industry not receiving government support was wool, which by commanding a strong position in international markets had less need for 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>46</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>47</sup> Page's ambivalence was the basis of his 1924 agreement with Bruce that industry-led cooperative 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 established in 1925 extended grants to various voluntary cooperative pools, he personally rejected a system of compulsory pools coordinated 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>48</sup>

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44 Ibid., pp. 228, 231.

45 '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.

46 A.G. Lloyd, 'Agricultural price policy', in D.B. Williams (ed.), *Agriculture in the Australian Economy*, second edition, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1982 (first published 1967), pp. 359–60.

47 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 105. The Paterson Scheme centred on dairy factories paying a levy on 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. The scheme operated from 1926 to 1934. See Lloyd, 'Agricultural Price Policy', in Williams, *Agriculture in the Australian Economy*, p. 367. Paterson had felt that the domestic price for butter had been unfairly deflated by tending to be set at the London price less handling and other costs.

48 Graham, *Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, pp. 228, 244.

## 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, as Graham observed of Page, '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>49</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 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>50</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 Australian Country Party Association (ACPA) at a national conference of the Country Party and allied organisations in Melbourne on 23 March 1926. Although the internal 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

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49 Ibid., p. 287.

50 Ibid., p. 248.

federal parliament in opposite directions – the Country Party was at first especially loosely organised.<sup>51</sup> (There was also a split over the 1926 tied road grants legislation, which was opposed by some Nationalists and only passed with Labor support.) AFFO support for any particular position, such as the 1924 electoral pact, was not decisive as it was essentially a confederation that formulated recommendations for approval by state bodies, which were themselves bound by their 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>52</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>53</sup> Page was reported as declaring it ‘essential to separate the industrial from the political activities of the Country Party’.<sup>54</sup> Page told Graham in interviews conducted in 1956 that his main motivation in creating the ACPA was a clearer division between the party organisation and the federal parliamentary party. This would place the development of policy detail and parliamentary tactics firmly with the latter (while still allowing ACPA conferences a lead role in formulating the party’s general policy platform).<sup>55</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 left the VFU to form a breakaway Country Progressive Party.<sup>56</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

51 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 151.

52 Graham, *Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, pp. 284–5.

53 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 142.

54 *The Land*, 26 March 1926, p. 13.

55 Page, interview by B.D. Graham, 22 February and 7 March 1956, B.D. Graham papers, NLA, MS 8471.

56 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 174.

the following year, creating a Central Council consisting of the federal parliamentary leader, two other federal representatives and 14 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>57</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 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>58</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>59</sup>

Page thus effectively made his own rules in the Country Party while it was still malleable. This was not to last. Over the next two decades the bulk of the party developed and consolidated 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 spent 1929–31 outside parliament and departed parliamentary politics for good in 1933, who maintained the principal developmentalist ideas that their government had upheld – Commonwealth-led coordination, 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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57 Graham, *Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, pp. 285–7.

58 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, pp. 119–20.

59 Graham, *Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, p. 246.

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