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PAGE AUDACIOUS

The 1930s

Page was out of ministerial office until November 1934 when the Country Party, belatedly, again formed a coalition with the urban-based conservatives, now recast as the United Australia Party (UAP). As a minister over 1934–39, Page successfully advocated fewer new policies than he had in the 1920s, but was as ambitious a visionary as ever. He was not restrained – but nor, for that matter, enabled – by a strong prime minister. The result was his two most audacious initiatives of all: attempts to unilaterally separate northern New South Wales from the rest of the state and, later, to establish governmental planning machinery for the shaping of Australia as a decentralised, regionalised nation.

Page faced a very different political landscape in this decade. The early 1930s was an unusually febrile time in Australian party politics. Under the stress of the Great Depression, most national and state governments were defeated at the polls. The ALP underwent splits involving both its right and left wings, and the new UAP absorbed elements of the Labor right. The Country Party sat on the cross-benches in parliament, but under an expectation that the coalition would be reinstated once the Scullin Labor Government had been defeated. The strident rhetoric of Premier Lang and the perception that his government had rendered itself illegitimate by repudiating interest payments to British bondholders inspired a loyalist, middle class-based countermovement of such organisations as the All for Australia League.

Much of the tension over Lang was alleviated by the success of the UAP, led by the affable Tasmanian Joseph Lyons, at the national election of December 1931 and the premier's sudden removal from office by the state governor the following May. Lyons had been a senior minister in the Scullin Government but emerged as the leader of party dissidents who rejected Treasurer Theodore's proposal to expand credit as a response to the Depression. Lyons finally broke with the ALP in March 1931 when he supported a motion of no confidence in the government. His electoral appeal of restraint and personal modesty encouraged a coterie of Melbourne business and political figures to entice him into becoming the UAP's first parliamentary leader.

The UAP united the Nationalists, former ALP members who favoured strict economic austerity and some more populist movements including the All for Australia League. The new party emerged from an economic and political crisis unprecedented in the short history of the Australian Commonwealth – 'cobbled together out of political expediency, it was a party of action without elaborate party rules or even a mission statement'.¹ Lyons was a very different personage from Page. His instinct was 'to delegate and to manage rather than command'.² Frank Green, who had known Lyons since they played football and cricket together in Tasmania before World War One, recalled that 'the vitriol of Hughes, the aloofness of Bruce, the ascetic reserve of Scullin, were replaced in Lyons by a warm friendliness, courtesy and kindness, which never failed even at times of great stress'.³ Prime Minister Lyons kept the UAP sufficiently united to reassure the public that stable government had been restored. It is a tribute to his ability to handle trenchant colleagues that, despite limited policy ambitions of his own, he eventually won Page's support and even admiration.

Page also expected to form a coalition immediately after Scullin's defeat. A joint party conference and policy statement for the 1931 election campaign even raised the possibility of the Country Party amalgamating with the UAP. Immediately after the election, Lyons offered the Country Party three portfolios (despite the UAP having won a parliamentary majority) but with the proviso that he alone would select ministers.

1 Anne Henderson, *Joseph Lyons: The People's Prime Minister*, NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, 2011, p. 319.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 315.

3 Green, *Servant of the House*, p. 98.

This proved unacceptable to the Country Party, and so Page and his colleagues elected to stay on the cross-benches. Privately, Page feared that Lyons was a ‘muddler’. He did not want to expose his Country Party to the ‘big Melbourne manufacturers and stockbrokers’ who had ‘buried alive’ John Latham, Lyons’s predecessor as Opposition leader.⁴

Once in office, Lyons’s reluctance to accede to Country Party demands for lower tariffs kept the two parties apart. Lyons did, however, cut many tariffs in early 1933 following advice from the Tariff Board, easing the path to reconciliation. Page received no shortage of advice from party members and farmers’ organisations on whether to attempt to resume the coalition but hesitated on the grounds that ‘the Country Party can do more in government than out of government’.⁵ The coalition was finally restored in November 1934, after the UAP lost its majority at the election of two months earlier and failed in an attempt to continue governing alone.

Lyons provided an assurance that future decisions on tariffs would be acceptable to the Country Party. Although the Country Party soon scored a success when the new coalition government duly cut tariffs on a large number of items of machinery, its overall status was weaker than in the Bruce–Page Government. It held only four positions in a ministry of 14, two of which were without portfolio. Page became minister for commerce and was again de facto deputy prime minister. Commerce was a lesser portfolio than that of treasurer, but it did give him responsibility for agriculture and overseas trade policy. Thomas Paterson, Page’s deputy until 1937, became minister for the interior.

During the 1930s, policy priority shifted from the national and rural development that had so suited Page in the 1920s to recovery from the Depression. Lyons maintained the deflationary policies of the Premiers’ Plan agreed between Scullin and the states in June 1931 that imposed a shared sacrifice through higher taxes, less public spending and reduced interest payments to local bond holders. His government set out to restore business confidence by balancing budgets and lowering costs, including through cuts to public service salaries and social service benefits.

4 ‘Muddler’, Earle Page to Ethel Page, 27 December 1931, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 7, folder 4; ‘big Melbourne...’, Page to A.G. Cameron, 29 April 1931, EPP, folder 810.

5 Page speech to the Riverina Division of the United Country Party, Wagga, 2 November 1934, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 7, folder 4.

Some emergency Depression taxes were also cut, while Stanley Bruce, back in parliament and now assistant treasurer, negotiated for reduced interest payments to British holders of Australian bonds.

Mid-1932 marked the start of a slow five-year period of recovery. Cheaper currency assisted export sales and the 1932 Ottawa Imperial Economic Conference gave Australian farmers greater access to British markets in return for lower tariffs on manufactures from Britain. Rural industries, particularly pastoralism, began a slow revival. Manufacturing recovered more strongly to become a mass employer, aided by the high tariffs imposed by Scullin and a devalued currency that made imports dearer. From 1933 unemployment began to fall but so gradually that it took until 1938 to reach 8 per cent, a middling rate for the previous decade.⁶ Page himself suffered personal financial stress, especially during the depths of the Depression early in the decade and again in 1936–37, but kept this quiet. He stayed as active as ever in public life.

Rural policy was much less ambitious than in the 1920s. The focus was on wheat and dried fruits, each driven by different pressures. The wheat industry was afflicted by low prices and debt acquired from overexpansion in the 1920s. Although over the period 1930–36 growers received bounties and relief payments from the Commonwealth, it was only following a fall in wheat prices that a home consumption price was introduced in 1938, financed by a flour tax. The 1934–36 Royal Commission on the Wheat, Flour and Bread Industries (chaired by Herbert Gepp) favoured a central marketing authority and continued Commonwealth Government assistance. Although it supported a home consumption price only as a strictly temporary relief measure, by adding that wheat farmers were entitled to the same benefits available to other industries it effectively opened the way for ongoing home consumption pricing. Policy on dried fruit was driven by unwelcome constitutional challenges to the regulation of interstate trade that came to occupy much of Page's time late in the decade.

More positively for Page, the 1930s offered a far richer intellectual discussion on policy than had the 1920s. The journals *Australian Quarterly* and *Public Administration* first appeared in 1929 and 1937 respectively, and the Australian Institute of Political Science (AIPS) was established

⁶ Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, p. 180; J.R. Robertson, '1930–39', in Crowley, *A New History of Australia*, pp. 435–6, 438.

in 1932. Widened debate drew forth reflections on Page's policy visions, especially planning and cooperative federalism. Economic thought began in the mid-1930s to turn to averting future depressions, leading many policy intellectuals towards a new openness to planning and welfarism that resulted in such publications as *Economic Planning*, the proceedings of a 1934 AIPS conference. Although these ponderings had an urban basis far removed from Page's native small-town habitat, they encouraged him to resume his interest in planning.

But the overall trend for Page during this decade remained one of growing difficulty in anchoring his personal initiatives in mainstream politics. The policy priorities of the Commonwealth Government narrowed, and the Country Party itself progressively offered Page less basis for pursuing his vision. There were also further signs that policy-making was building on the Development and Migration Commission and the Brigden Enquiry of the previous decade by continuing to shift towards greater reliance on economic expertise, eventually to provide a fertile basis for the acceptance of Keynesianism. The 1937 Royal Commission on Monetary and Banking Systems, for example, recommended that the Commonwealth Bank work to reduce fluctuations in the economy.

Page in the 1930s therefore found himself having to be keenly alert for opportunities to pursue his developmentalist agenda. His focus shifted as different opportunities appeared, making him the leading national advocate of change in five related elements of his national vision in sequence. Each arose from very different circumstances. Regionalism and new statism were revived by dramatic events in New South Wales, foremost being Lang's interest payment repudiation in 1931–32. From 1934 Page became directly involved in the campaign to establish a university in New England, led by new state advocates and providing a focus for his long-standing interest in rural-based education. His renewed engagement with cooperative federalism via Commonwealth–state policy councils was driven by the need to respond to challenges to Australia's trade interests and orderly marketing, leading to the creation of the Australian Agricultural Council in 1934. In 1936, electrification re-emerged briefly via Page's alertness to opportunities linked to trade policy and to collaboration with New South Wales.

Finally, Page became Australia's foremost political proponent of national planning. This was aided by the threat of war and led to his extraordinary 1938–39 attempt to create a National Council of Commonwealth and

state ministers. This policy venture involved an effective hijacking of the government from the ailing Lyons. It encompassed all the objectives of Page's preceding policy campaigns on decentralisation, electrification, rural services and Commonwealth–state cooperation. Its abject failure was to be a factor in Page's dramatic attack on Robert Menzies and fall from political power.

Page's freedoms as a private member, 1929–34: The resurgence of new statism

The defeat of the Bruce–Page Government restored the federal Country Party to a freedom it had not experienced since the pioneering days of the early 1920s and its challenges to the Hughes Government. Page described the five years that followed 1929 as a period that 'sharpened our wits and enabled us to prepare public opinion for the policies we hoped to implement when the next opportunity came'.⁷ Characteristically, it was Page who took greatest advantage of this release from ministerial office and coalition to become outspoken on issues dear to him.

An early instance arose from Scullin's almost desperate attempt to counter the Depression via trade barriers. This was a cue for Country Party MPs to resume public attacks on tariffs after years of strained silence and for Page to revive his more finely balanced ideas on how tariffs should be applied. In July 1930 he spoke of the nation having gone 'tariff mad', especially as hampering the importation of electrical equipment retarded electrification across the economy. Page delighted in bold international comparisons, and so cast this as a reason why Australia was developing more slowly than Canada. He made clear his willingness to protect Australian manufacturing, but only where this concentrated on internationally competitive products based on primary inputs such as wool and flour. Lack of such targeting resulted in Australia having 'built up many exotic industries that are non-essential and unsuited for the natural environment of the country'.⁸

But the issue Page pursued most energetically was new statism, for the first time since his disappointment before the Cohen Royal Commission. In the wake of the Bruce–Page Government's defeat, Page's erstwhile

7 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 227.

8 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 17 July 1930, pp. 4252–4, 4260.

friend Percy Stewart accurately predicted to Hughes that ‘no doubt Page will bring out his New State hobby horse and mount him again’.⁹ New statism demonstrated its capacity to readily flare up as a focus for rural resentment by broadening markedly in the late 1920s and early 1930s, energetically fanned by Page. He rapidly became its central figure, including a largely successful effort to unite the various New South Wales new state movements. The main underlying cause of the revival was the impact of the Depression on rural Australia, but Lang’s first repudiation in March 1931 provided a galvanising issue for Page and his followers to demand the separation of the state’s north. To them, Lang’s actions justified dispensing with constitutional formalities in favour of rebellion against a government that had rendered itself illegitimate, casting themselves as they did so as upholders of the federal Constitution. The defeat of the Bavin–Buttenshaw State Government in October 1930 helped by releasing New South Wales Country Party figures of the calibre of Bruxner and Drummond to join this campaign.

New state agitation strengthened in three very different ways. First, there was a marked geographic widening of campaigning beyond northern New South Wales. From 1931, the movement acquired an added base in the Riverina, drawing on the precedent of the Riverina New State League that had been active in the early 1920s. Agitation briefly matched that in the state’s north, invigorated by the charismatic leadership of the Wagga Wagga timber merchant Charles Hardy. The course of events in this region was to have great implications for Page. There were also lesser revivals in the west and south-east of New South Wales, and in northern Queensland.

Second, new intellectual proponents and political movements added non-rural strands to new statism and decentralisation. New states became a beacon for agitation for constitutional change and creative responses to the Depression, overlapping with the more parochial agendas of older school new staters. This included movements that proffered themselves as avowedly anti-political alternatives to conventional party politicking. The outspoken decentralist civil engineer Alex Gibson, for example, was prime mover in the All for Australia League.

9 Letter from Stewart to Hughes, 30 October 1929, quoted in Graham, *Formation of the Australian Country Parties*, p. 284.

Page dallied with these more rarefied advocates in the early 1930s and again during the post-war era. Some responded by openly recognising him as the pre-eminent political advocate of new states and decentralisation. Bland, increasingly outspoken from his base at the University of Sydney on all kinds of issues, often wrote in support of Page initiatives. In the early 1930s Bland was an advocate of decentralisation and regionalism but not of the new states that had been so far proposed, which he thought would still be so large as to pose problems of remoteness. He dismissed northern New South Wales agitation as merely seeking a bigger share of public expenditure, and proposed amalgamating local councils into larger district councils, reminiscent of the Cohen recommendation.¹⁰ The geographer J. Macdonald Holmes thought it opportune to create new states now that the geographic limits for agriculture were being reached, helping delineate natural boundaries for settlement.¹¹ More marginal but still outspoken figures included Dr Norman Pern, a Sydney general practitioner, who in his 1932 booklet *Australia Speaking!: Is Earle Page Right?* wrongly asserted that Page was interested only in splitting up New South Wales. Pern's own vision was of a 'United Federation of Australia' based on self-governing regions united by a national railway system.¹² A few new state advocates tried making use of broader interest in constitutional reform. In April 1933 Ulrich Ellis established (apparently at his own behest) a Constitution League in Canberra, a short-lived discussion group which attracted Solicitor-General Fred Whitlam and Labor-leaning journalist Warren Denning.¹³

Third, the wider regional base and engagement of articulate intellectuals encouraged a more national approach to new states, reminiscent of what Page had advocated at the Albury convention of July 1922. As the seasoned campaigner V.C. Thompson later recalled, there was an 'enlarging of the movement's sphere of political interest on the national plane'.¹⁴ The Northern New South Wales Movement's 1929 convention at Armidale unanimously adopted a resolution calling for 'a national

10 F.A. Bland, 'The Abolition of States and the Increase of Local Government Bodies', reprinted from *The Shire and Municipal Record*, November 1932, copy in Ulrich Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 15, folder 55.

11 J. Macdonald Holmes, *The 'New States' Idea and Its Geographic Background*, New Century Press, Sydney, 1933.

12 Copies of Pern's publications are in the Ulrich Ellis collection, UNE Archives, A811, box 13.

13 See Ellis's account of the league's meeting of 11 April 1933, Ulrich Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 22, series 7B, folder 97.

14 From a historical account of the new state movement written by Thompson for Page (untitled), January 29 1958, p. 1, EPP, folder 2146.

movement for a new Federal system with a new distribution of powers and a new distribution of territory'.¹⁵ Another national convention was held in Canberra in May 1930 against the background of the Scullin Government's attempt to liberalise mechanisms for constitutional amendment, and called for adoption of the Peden formula for new states.¹⁶ Page became directly involved in the two main groups to emerge from this revival, bolstering his claim to national leadership of the new state movement: the Sydney-based Federal Reconstruction Movement (FRM), and the United Country Movement (UCM), which was to merge with the Country Party in 1931.

The FRM arose from the preference intellectual supporters of new states and decentralisation had for broader bodies than individual regional movements. It was formed in July 1932 with Stanley Kingsbury as first honorary secretary, a professional publicist who Page had once engaged to advise the new state cause.¹⁷ Kingsbury advised the new state campaign to form a Sydney reform league to build urban-based support in anticipation of a statewide referendum. The FRM now proposed replacing the states with smaller federal units, and shared Page's interest in transferring many state powers to a strong national government.¹⁸ The FRM's other leading lights included Bland, educationalist and state public servant H.L. Harris and Sydney barrister Richard Windeyer.

But the UCM was the most important organisation to arise from the 1931–32 spike in new state agitation. It was the closest the new state movement ever came to a united structure. The UCM was also the main basis for Page's resumption of active leadership of the movement. It emerged from a chain of events that began with the rise of the United Australia Association, led by Hardy to promote the Riverina cause. Hardy at his peak portrayed himself as offering a full alternative to the Country Party.¹⁹ His impassioned calls for direct action to free the Riverina from the grip of Lang's Sydney led to his being cast as that rarest of species in the Australian political pantheon, the demagogue. Robert Clyde Packer – Frank's father – dubbed him the Cromwell of the Riverina.

15 Ibid., p. 1.

16 *The Canberra Times*, 20 May 1930, p. 2, and 21 May 1930, p. 5.

17 See Kingsbury to Page, 13 June 1932, EPP, folder 1020.

18 See Ellis, *New Australian States*, p. 224; and 'Report to Annual Meeting by the Provisional Executive Committee' of the FRM by R. Windeyer and Stanley Kingsbury, 28 September 1932, David Henry Drummond papers, UNE Archives, A248, V3010, folder 6.

19 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 171; Aitkin, *The Colonel*, pp. 136–7.

Hardy's speeches included oblique references to a secret paramilitary force supposedly at his disposal. His threats of unilateral secession attracted the attention of the New South Wales Police and the Commonwealth Investigation Branch. Andrew Moore in his history of right-wing agitation of the time concluded that paramilitary movements of the early 1930s, especially the Old Guard, had a distinct rural element. Some members were prominent in the Country Party and new statism, notably Aubrey Abbott, member for the federal seat of Gwydir and minister for home affairs in the final year of the Bruce–Page Government. They shared an avowed readiness to assume control should there be a breakdown of the Lang Government.²⁰ It was through Abbott that Page was introduced to the leader of the breakaway and more publicly prominent New Guard, Eric Campbell. Campbell found that Page 'expressed himself as being enthusiastically behind the New Guard, but his counsel was much more militant than I was prepared to accept'. The problem was presumably the proposed breakaway of New England, as Campbell recollected that 'our conversation was mainly directed to the New State Movement and water conservation' and claimed that his New Guard was 'purely a defensive organisation and could and would do nothing unless there was a breakdown too extensive for the police to control'.²¹ There is no indication from Campbell or elsewhere that Page ever joined the New Guard, hardly a likely action by someone so accustomed to seeing himself as leader.

Hardy envisaged the secession of the Riverina as ushering in a regime of local authorities that would, rather incongruously, be led by a strong national parliament. He was Page's only serious rival as the new state movement's foremost public figure, and he thought that devious northerners were misusing new statism as a means of promoting the Country Party. He was even suspected of having designs on the national leadership of the Country Party. In May 1931, Hardy publicly challenged Page accordingly:

If Earle Page refuses to co-operate with the Riverina and Western Movements, our intention is to go to the north coast to test whether the people want Dr Page or the Riverina Movement. Watch out, Dr Page, that you do not get out of step with the country people.²²

20 Andrew Moore, *The Secret Army and the Premier: Conservative Paramilitary Organisations in New South Wales 1930–32*, New South Wales University Press, Kensington, NSW, 1989, pp. 93–9, 103–6.

21 Eric Campbell, *The Rallying Point: My Story of the New Guard*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1965, pp. 97–8, 100.

22 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 178.

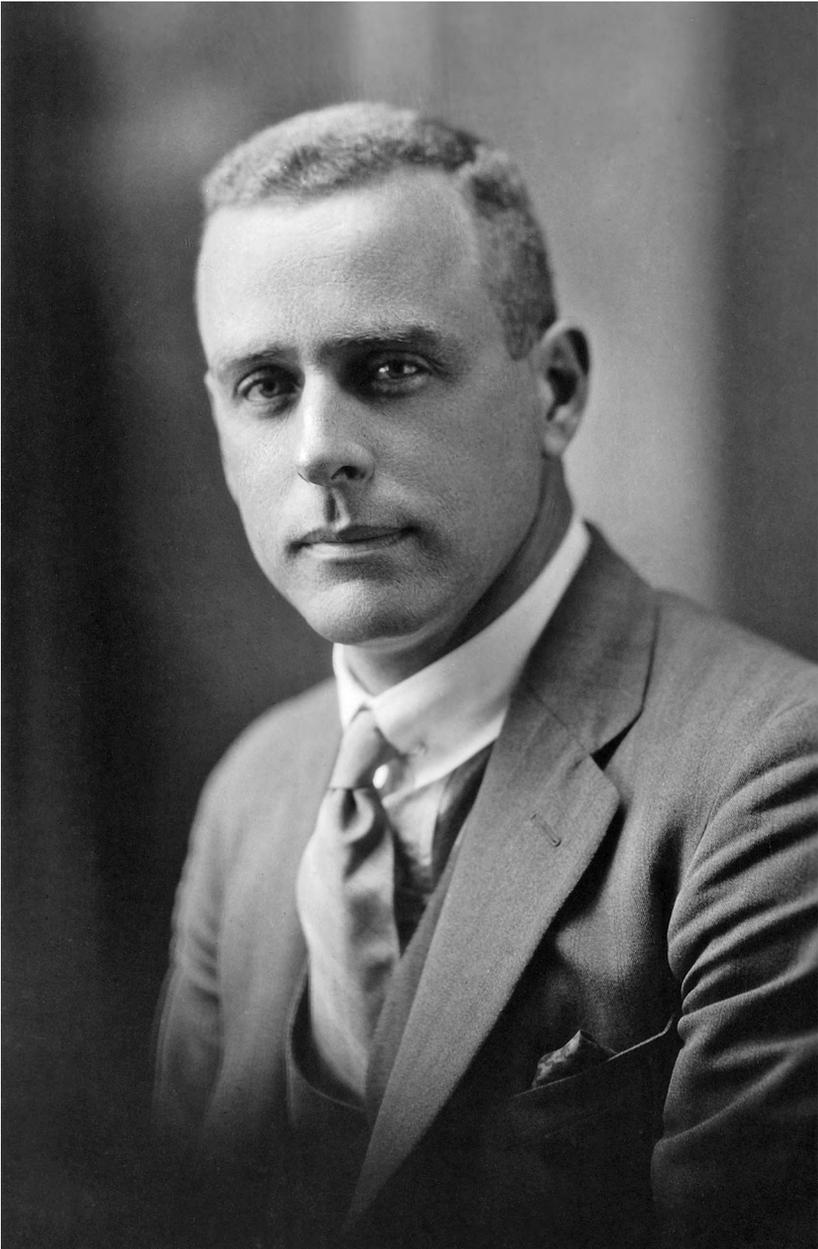


Figure 8: Charles Hardy, c. 1931: Regional demagogue pictured in respectable mode.

Source: Courtesy of National Library of Australia, nla.pic-an24716332, Lorne Studio.

Page wrote in his memoirs of the Riverina movement's attempt, backed by unspecified 'influential Sydney personalities', to take the place of the state Country Party. He drolly called all these pressures 'diverse undercurrents', which were successfully neutralised by the creation of the UCM.²³ 'Sydney personalities' may have been an oblique reference to the city-based All for Australia League, which had strong ties to the protectionist Chamber of Manufactures of New South Wales and had made overtures to Hardy. Some Country Party figures suspected the League of plotting to eventually absorb all non-Labor parties. But Hardy presented only a passing challenge. As a long-standing party leader with a good prospect of shortly returning to government, Page in 1931 was a firmly established national figure. Hardy soon displayed the typical limitations of the demagogue by outstripping his capacity for substantive action. He did not have a firm platform beyond the Riverina movement and lacked grounding in practical politics. His contempt for established politicians and suspected interest in the party leadership drew the disdain of more accomplished rural leaders such as Bruxner.

During 1931 Hardy slowly entered into alliances with other new staters and the Country Party. Over March to August he attended a series of four conventions of New South Wales new state movements. By June he had publicly reclassified Page, Bruxner and Drummond as colleagues to be thanked for having 'helped the new movements over the hurdles of constitutional difficulties'.²⁴ At the August convention Hardy called for all four regional movements in New South Wales to be moulded into one organisation, leading to the creation of the UCM with himself as chair. In October he led a Riverina delegation to the prime minister, only to find that Scullin not only opposed new states but favoured an all-powerful federal parliament that at its pleasure delegated powers to provinces and could amend the Constitution effectively at will. This prospect so unnerved Hardy that he switched to favouring more fully sovereign new states, bringing him yet closer to Page.²⁵

Hardy wholly entered the Country Party fold when elected a senator in December 1931. He became representative of the malleability of so much new state agitation and its tendency to lack sustainable strategies. The UCM was soon effectively absorbed within the Country Party by being given

23 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 207.

24 Aitkin, *The Colonel*, p. 138.

25 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, pp. 180–1; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 October 1931, p. 9.

a place on the Central Council of the redubbed United Country Party (UCP) of New South Wales. The UCP supported the division of New South Wales along the lines of its new state movements – the Riverina, the north, the west, and the Monaro–south coastal–metropolitan region. Hardy’s earlier calls for expanded local authorities had aroused such suspicions he was a mere unificationist that the UCM–UCP union was only consummated after he underwent searching questioning by Drummond. Hardy’s response that ‘he was utterly opposed to unification’ and that ‘his position as chairman did not mean that he was the Leader of the Movement’ effectively marked his surrendering of any lingering pretensions to national leadership of new statism.²⁶

Although Page declined an offer to lead the UCM, he became its main driver. He had the public status and political skills to tie it to his own northern wing of the movement, and soon outshone Hardy. He supported the UCM’s de facto union with the Country Party and successfully proposed that it broaden its platform to advocate continued subdivision into ‘new federal units’, the shift of selected powers from the states to the Commonwealth and a national transport authority.²⁷ Almost uniquely among new state organisations, the UCM proclaimed criteria for delineating the boundaries of new states, albeit broad ones – political and economic balance, ‘community of interest’, facility of communications, diversity of production and natural outlets for trade.²⁸

Page was also central to the UCM’s entering into an alliance with the FRM. Soon after the UCM was formed, he and other UCM figures met with the FRM leadership, including Bland. The FRM was relieved to find that ‘no difference exists between the objectives as we understand them of the Federal Reconstruction Movement and the ultimate objectives of the United Country Movement’, including the transfer of transport and industrial powers to the Commonwealth prior to subdividing New South Wales. So reassured was it that Page and Drummond were elected as FRM vice-presidents.²⁹

26 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 179.

27 Minutes of joint meeting of the New England, Riverina, Monaro–South Coast and Western movements, 13 August 1931, Ulrich Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 14, folder 45.

28 Ellis, *New Australian States*, p. 227.

29 Letter to the Secretary of the FRM from Bland, H.L. Harris and R.W.G. MacKay, undated but internal evidence suggests August 1932, David Henry Drummond papers, UNE Archives, A248, V3010, folder 6; the *Armidale Express* of 18 November 1932, p. 3 reported on the UCM conference in Armidale and the election of FRM vice-presidents.

A nominally united new state body assembled from multiple geographic and sectoral bases was always at risk from regional rivalries and conflicting motivations. Northern New South Wales disagreed with other regional movements over the configuration of its proposed new state, such as where its deep-water port should be sited. At the August 1931 convention western New South Wales objected to being bracketed with Sydney. It was felt by Drummond and Holmes that the metropolis needed a hinterland.³⁰ Drummond remained uneasy over the FRM and warned Page in November 1933 that Bland's plan for non-sovereign provinces 'somewhat along the lines of the English County Council' was bound to fail given 'the centralising influence which is bred in the bone of the people of this state'.³¹ The importance that leaders of the Riverina and Northern movements attached to simpler and cheaper governments must have sowed unease among many grassroots supporters hoping for more public funding. But the 1929–32 revival did show that new statism and an elite-led sense of rural grievance had not only maintained a place in Australian political culture but also had grown to acquire urban-based adherents. Page played a central strategic role in this, not least by successfully resisting Hardy's short-lived bid to become national leader.

Page militant: Leading the attempted secession of New England

Page's campaigning for new states reached its most militant phase in 1931–32. While dealing with Hardy, the FRM and the UCM, he simultaneously led the most remarkable of all new state campaigns, premised on the outright condemnation of the government of New South Wales as illegitimate. Page and his followers responded to their fear of the complete breakdown of government by plotting the unilateral separation of the state's north. Although this effort at secession evaporated almost immediately Premier Lang was removed from office, the episode is arguably Australia's greatest political conspiracy. It reveals much about the broader climate of ideas of the time and Page's unique ability to lead the new state movement.

30 Neale, 'New States Movement', *Australian Quarterly*, p. 16.

31 Drummond to Page, 29 November 1935, Drummond papers, UNE Archives, A248, V3010, folder 8, part 5.

The rural dimension to anti-Lang agitation drew on some basic mores of rural community culture – thrift and the belief that paying one’s debts is an important matter of personal honour. This was so strong that it outweighed resentment of the large banks. It reflected a deep sense of a ‘moral economy’ as being essential to the nation’s financial stability and made financial repudiation by a government highly suggestive of unfitness to rule.³² This moral reinforcement of calls for northern secession was a central feature of Page’s public campaigning.

On 9 February 1931 Lang announced his intention to repudiate the payment of interest due to foreign bond holders. (Lang subsequently twice defaulted on overseas interest payments, in March 1931 and again in January–February 1932). Page at once proposed to his ‘closest colleagues’ an entirely new and radical strategy based on the north declaring separation from New South Wales, now seen by him as an outlaw state. He consulted legal advisers and the state Country Party MPs Bruxner and Roy Vincent, then arranged for the journalists Thompson and Sommerlad to work on the northern press.³³ Page went public just eight days after Lang’s announcement, in a speech he delivered at Glenreagh on the state’s north coast. Default ‘must automatically place New South Wales out of the Federal Union’ and so ‘the people of the North seem to have no other course but to cut adrift from New South Wales’.³⁴ Otherwise, he wrote privately, ‘they become repudiators also and suffer the penalties of repudiation – no capital for development in the next generation; withdrawal of capital by all who can because once a government has repudiated in one direction it cannot be trusted not to in others’.³⁵

Page’s leadership of this campaign demonstrated his aggressive readiness to seize opportunities. It was he who summoned northern delegates to an Annual New States convention at Armidale on 28 February to endorse his proposals to form a provisional executive and submit a draft constitution to federal parliament.³⁶ He assured delegates that ‘now is the psychological moment when the whole of Australia is stirred, and when our requests for admission are unanswerable’, and called for petitions

32 Michael Cathcart, *Defending the National Tuckshop: Australia’s Secret Intrigue of 1931*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Fitzroy, Vic., 1988, p. 22; Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class*, pp. 108–9.

33 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 204.

34 Quoted in Ellis, *New Australian States*, pp. 205–6.

35 Page to R. Jones of Canowindra, 7 March 1931, Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 14, folder 44.

36 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 205.

to the Commonwealth and British governments seeking recognition.³⁷ Page blamed Scullin's fiscal policies and the Lang left of the ALP for threatening the Financial Agreement, New South Wales and indeed the entire nation. The new state's constitution would impose limits on taxes and borrowing to protect rural Australia from such urban profligacy. Page the fiscal conservative was always loath to concede that any of his own plans could impose on the public purse. A self-governing, frugal New England would attract investors and set an example to be copied across the nation. Privately, he told Ellis that northern MPs should leave state parliament at once and establish a government based at Armidale.³⁸

This was all a typical Page strategy: seizing an opportunity to implement a long-held aim that would normally lack support; lining up important contacts; issuing strident public calls for immediate action; and then trying to push through the necessary arrangements, all with only as much regard for constitutional requirements and other inconveniences as was necessary. His approach was shadowy but teasingly semi-public. Page also rallied the New England New State Movement at a pivotal convention in Maitland in April 1931, which endorsed its constitution and working with other new state movements. Page exhorted his fellow new state militants to see themselves not as rebels but as loyalists intent on returning their territory to the national fold by rejecting Lang's effective withdrawal of New South Wales from the federation.³⁹

Lang's threats were also important in the convening of the meetings that had brought Page and Hardy together in the UCM and where Page assumed ascendancy. At a rally at Wagga Wagga on 28 February 1931, Hardy issued an ultimatum to the state government to meet local demands by the end of the following month. Page recounted that, soon afterwards, Hardy privately confessed that he had no idea what to do if Lang stood firm – which the premier indeed did. Follow the lead of the New Englanders, advised Page, by now clearly the movement's leader.⁴⁰ Like Drummond, he was troubled by Hardy's countenancing weak local councils rather than the sovereign entities of the bona fide new stater. Page also hoped to keep open the option of a properly constitutional route

37 Speech by Page to New States Convention 28 February 1931, New England New State Movement, Armidale, UNE Archives, A1, box 14.

38 Ulrich Ellis, *A Pen in Politics*, Ginninderra Press, Charnwood, ACT, 2007, p. 174.

39 Speech of 7 April 1931, in Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 12, series 6A, folder 33. For details of the Maitland conference, see Ellis, *New Australian States*, pp. 210–13, 256–9.

40 Page, *Traunt Surgeon*, pp. 205–6.

to new states. In parliament in April he called on Scullin to recognise New England and the Riverina, either by a referendum to adopt the Peden formula for new states or by persuading the British Parliament to intervene.⁴¹

Page was not merely ‘flirting briefly and somewhat reluctantly with right-wing revolutionary politics’, as has been claimed.⁴² Documentation such as the diary and memoirs of his observant chronicler Ellis indicate that Page was absolutely determined in leading a properly bold response to what he saw as an unprecedented challenge to the very fundamentals of governance. Nor was he one to forgo a rare opportunity to implement an important element of his personal vision. Ellis recalled in his history of new statism, published soon after these events, that whenever the movement seemed divided over the wisdom of such militancy, it was Page who rallied them. He pointed to Page’s strident speech at Glenreagh invoking the West Virginians’ self-declared secession from their mother state of Virginia at the onset of the American Civil War in 1861, ‘when the Constitution was infringed, so their honour might be unsmirched, their reputation untarnished, their obligations fulfilled and their progress and development as an integral part of the Federal Union assured’.⁴³ Dedicated new staters frequently drew a parallel with West Virginia, despite the vastly different historical circumstances. Ellis’s detailed diary of the lead-up to the Maitland convention provides further evidence of Page’s commitment. Page confided that achievement of a new state would rank alongside the Nymboida power scheme and the Financial Agreement as his lifetime achievements.⁴⁴

Ellis also captured Page’s confidence that he was far ahead of all others in thought and action. He wrote of Page convening an all-day and night meeting on 22 March 1931 at Parliament House, Sydney, with state and federal MPs in an attempt to secure their support for secession, only to be

41 Ellis, *New Australian States*, pp. 213–14; *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 16 April 1931, pp. 924–8.

42 Carl Bridge, ‘Page, Sir Earle Christmas (1880–1961)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/page-sir-earle-christmas-7941/text13821, published first in hardcopy volume 11, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, Vic., 1988.

43 Page quoted in Ellis, *New Australian States*, p. 206.

44 Typed text of diary in Ulrich Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 12, series 6A, folder 33, entry for 24 February 1931. This diary was quoted at length in Ellis’s posthumously published memoirs. Parts of the original handwritten version survive in the Ellis papers and differ only in very minor details; see MS 1006, box 14, series 6, folder 44.

subsequently disappointed by their caution. Hardy is shown in the diary as soon after again looking to Page and the northerners for a lead, such as by proposing that Riverina adopt the New England constitution.⁴⁵ Bruxner makes a telling comment that Page had not only started the campaign in 1915 but ever since 'his continual activity had kept it alive'.⁴⁶ Page also wrote to Drummond on his consultations with MPs who could form the 'Governing Body' of the new state using terms that affirm the depth of his determination. He reiterated that 'this is the psychological moment and possibly our only ever chance of ever getting away with it'. If it failed, then 'so far as I am concerned I am finished with politics completely and will devote myself to my professional work and leave it to another generation to gather the results of the seed we have sown'.⁴⁷

Nearly a year later, in April 1932 when Lang was threatening further repudiations in defiance of Commonwealth legislation, the UCM executive telegraphed the recently elected Prime Minister Lyons to demand a referendum on 'the immediate reconstruction of the state of New South Wales into smaller federal units'.⁴⁸ Lyons opposed separation. Ellis penned an extraordinary letter to a contact in Brisbane in which he used personal euphemisms to describe how Page – dubbed by Ellis the 'President' – had just approached federal Cabinet in a bid for support for his proposed breakaway state. Lyons was similarly labelled by Ellis the 'Chairman of Directors', Assistant Treasurer Bruce was the 'Cashier', and Attorney-General Latham was cast as the 'Lawyer'. Bruce was quoted as commenting that 'he thought the Chairman of Directors would have to fight our branch [i.e. the new state movement] if we adopted the attitude outlined by the President'. But he added that 'there are other people in the world he wants to fight more and with more reason'.⁴⁹ Ellis had a well-developed sense of the dramatic, but this subterfuge is not wholly outlandish. The political tensions of these months were sufficient to raise fear of conflict between the law enforcement forces of the Commonwealth and those of New South Wales.

45 Ellis, *A Pen in Politics*, p.179; also Ellis diary, 28 and 30 March 1931, *ibid.*

46 Ellis diary, 28 March 1931, *ibid.*

47 Page to Drummond, 18 March 1931, Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 14, folder 44.

48 Moore, *The Secret Army and the Premier*, p. 176.

49 Ellis to his school friend Jack Ridler, 7 March 1932, Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 14, folder 45. Page provides a brief account of this meeting in *Truant Surgeon*, pp. 210–11.

The UCM leadership met on 17 April 1932 at Page's Wollstonecraft residence in Sydney, followed the next day by a meeting of the UCM at which its executive revealed the intended plan for secession. This would begin with all 'loyal state members' being called together 'for the purpose of subdividing New South Wales into four units'.⁵⁰ Local conventions were to be held at Armidale, Wagga Wagga, Dubbo and Sydney to appoint provisional governments, which would then each proceed to seek Commonwealth recognition followed by a referendum to ratify a new state constitution. Finally, the constitution and boundaries would be submitted to the Commonwealth Parliament with an appeal to recognise the new states and to guarantee payments until elections were held for permanent governments.⁵¹

But UCM delegates raised doubts immediately, especially over timing. Although Page as leader had a strong personal network throughout the movement, he was not in complete control. The conspiracy had become increasingly diverse with the addition of Hardy and others. Page wanted to set a definite date for action, but Hardy – no longer an antipodean Cromwell – managed to persuade them all to wait for one more 'overt act' by Lang. Page described Hardy as having been 'theatrical' at this meeting: the leader of the Western Movement, E.J. Body, was 'timid'. The most Page could elicit was agreement on a coded telegram from the executive to the various movements as the signal to implement the plan when the time finally came.⁵² In public, Page broadcast by radio that if the Commonwealth Government did not act to 'reconstruct New South Wales and remove its rebel government', then 'the country men will be forced to take the lead themselves by creating their own governments who will obey the Federal law and Constitution, protect the people, develop resources, and defy the rebel elements in the community'.⁵³ In parliament, a Labor MP asked the attorney-general whether action would be taken against Page for preaching sedition.⁵⁴

50 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, pp. 209–10.

51 Ellis in his *A History of the Australian Country Party*, pp. 188–9, provides a similar description of the action proposed, but gives a different date for what appears to be the same executive meeting, 8 April 1932; and in his memoirs refers to the Emergency Committee of the UCM as meeting on 9 April 1932, *A Pen in Politics*, p. 184.

52 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 210.

53 *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 21 April 1932, p. 8.

54 Rowley James, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 14 April 1931, p. 757.

On 12 May Lang refused to comply with federal legislation enabling the Commonwealth to reclaim from New South Wales monies it had spent to meet the state's debts, whereupon the state governor, Sir Philip Game, dismissed him from office. The speed with which this took the wind out of militant new statism implies much about its capacity to sustain Page's ultimate national goals. There is no indication anywhere that resentment of Lang, intense as it was in rural New South Wales, amounted to a popular groundswell favouring unilateral independence of the north, the Riverina or anywhere else. Over a year earlier Sommerlad had informed Page that he 'was rather surprised to find during my stay in the North that the secession idea is by no means as popular as we fondly imagined' and that 'if a referendum were taken on the question of the new state, it would have no chance of being carried so far as the Tableland is concerned'.⁵⁵ Nor did the movement's supporters have a strong enough presence within local governments, police, essential services and other vital points to have ever been able to assert control. Ellis had noted in his diary the paucity of support from state MPs. In his memoirs, he also observed a decline in Riverina interest in a new state, which he attributed to the expectation that all would be well once Lang was removed.⁵⁶ Page's advocacy of rebellion had been all the more daring for being led by a militant few rather than by public demand.

The Lang dismissal suddenly removed a shared focus from a narrow group of rebellious rural political, newspaper and business leaders. Page himself worked to a different dynamic than most new state sympathisers, who were at heart driven by short-term considerations of the state of the rural economy and dread of Langism. These years provided him with a seeming opportunity to redesign the federal system that he promptly seized with minimal concern for its unorthodoxy. Page was much more a man of ends rather than of means. He had greater ability than any other new state leader to provide continuity and attract wider attention, if not necessarily actual support. He also had superior capacity to cope with day-to-day events and to propose strategy in response than did passing rivals like Hardy. Hardy, incidentally, lost his Senate seat in 1937 before serving with the civilian defence effort in World War Two. He died in an air crash in Queensland in August 1941.

55 Sommerlad to Page, 17 March 1931, Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 14, folder 51.

56 Ellis diary, 27 February 1931, NLA, MS 1006, box 12, series 6A, folder 33; Ellis, *A Pen in Politics*, pp. 182–3.

For over six years following Lang's demise, Page again let new states and decentralisation drift as he, Bruxner and Drummond re-entered government and the Depression slowly receded. His political focus from 1934 shifted to nurturing a successful coalition with the UAP. Although Page found Lyons more pliable than Bruce had been, the prime minister's own engagement with new states remained inconsistent and driven by his efforts to manage his fluctuating relationship with the Country Party. Lyons in 1931–32 took some interest in a constitutional convention when it seemed likely that the Country Party would partner the UAP in a coalition. The shared policy program that he and Page produced in October 1931 included the elimination of overlapping federal–state powers, 'new self-governing Federal units' and referenda on the division of New South Wales.⁵⁷ Soon after, Lyons drew on Peden's findings of 1929 to propose clarification of the Constitution's provisions on new states and in June 1933, as prime minister, unsuccessfully proposed to the states a constitutional convention.⁵⁸

New statism gained one other genuine new proponent in the political mainstream during this decade: Bertram Stevens, Lang's successor as premier. Like Page, Stevens has been underrated as a policy visionary. He was weighed down by his personal lack of political skills. Stevens showed distinct signs of taking cues from the Country Party, having a relationship with his coalition partner Bruxner that appeared closer than that with his own UAP colleagues. He came to office on a joint platform with the United Country Party that provided for a referendum on new states. In March 1932 Stevens used strikingly Page-like references when speaking on constitutional change, such as subdivision into 'new Federal units' and safeguards to prevent these putative entities from ever repudiating debt.⁵⁹ In February 1934 he succeeded in convening a conference in Melbourne of the state premiers to discuss constitutional reform, only to have proceedings overshadowed by Western Australia's announcement of intended secession.⁶⁰

57 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, pp. 208, 214; the full text of the policy program is at pp. 391–2.

58 Speech by Lyons, 2 December 1931, New States, UNE Archives, A1, box 14. The proposed convention is mentioned in a history by Ellis of constitutional conventions; Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 22, series 7B, folder 97. For summaries of what was proposed and critical reactions by two states, see the *Advertiser*, 12 June 1933, p. 8, and the *Geraldton Guardian and Express*, 17 June 1933, p. 2.

59 Bertram Stevens's speech on constitutional reform, 25 March 1932, New States, UNE Archives, A1, box 14.

60 Mentioned in Ellis's history of constitutional conventions, NLA, MS 1006, box 22, series 7B, folder 97. See the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 February 1934, p. 8, for a summary of this conference.

Stevens's main contribution to the cause was the 1933–35 Nicholas Royal Commission. This was widely called the Boundaries Commission as it was restricted to delineating suitable boundaries for new states. It defined two suitable areas: a northern state that included Newcastle; and a large central, western and southern region encompassing the Riverina, Wollongong and the south coast. Page claimed to see this as a vindication, but the royal commission, for the time being, came to nothing. Most of the New South Wales UAP had no enthusiasm for new states and Bruxner rejected a referendum in the north as likely to be defeated by a strong 'no' vote from the Newcastle area.⁶¹ Many new state activists did not want Newcastle and Wollongong included in new states. The main long-term legacy of the Nicholas Royal Commission was that a 1967 northern new state referendum failed when a strong 'yes' vote in the far north was indeed negated by opposition from around Newcastle.

In 1938–39 Stevens would be the only state premier to support Page's National Council planning initiative. Along with Richard Casey, he was the senior political figure most in tune with Page's developmentalist vision. Stevens later recalled that 'over the years, I have felt that the name and entity of the Country Party correspond to something deep down in the consciousness of many thoughtful people, by no means confined to the rural areas'.⁶² Stevens and Casey encouraged Page but, over time, both became so marginal in their own parliamentary parties that they could not provide the decisive support he needed.

Yet Page in these inter-war years still managed to reignite and uphold the idea of a new state in northern New South Wales. Despite this, some new staters made known their disappointment with him. Looking back, Thompson implicitly criticised Page by opining that the movement's decisive need had long been a clear lead from the Commonwealth Government, such as by declaring a new state in Australia's far north.⁶³ Such assessments are harsh. Although he could not assert full control of the wider new state movement as it diversified, Page remained by far its most visible and respected figurehead. Few contemporary observers thought Page a poor political practitioner of day-to-day political arts. Hughes did briefly, but soon learnt better.

61 See Ellis, *A Pen in Politics*, pp. 197, 200; Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 382; also Aitkin, *The Colonel*, pp. 159, 163.

62 Stevens in the *Scrutineer and Berrima District Press*, 26 June 1948, p. 2. Stevens was writing rejecting post-war proposals to amalgamate the Liberal and Country Parties.

63 From Thompson's history of the new state movement, EPP, folder 2146, p. 6.

Page's intermittent withdrawals from the new state cause were not due to his using the issue primarily for local advantage but had more to do with his obligations to the Bruce–Page and Lyons governments. His very different political standing from other new state enthusiasts generated a special tension that he managed by assuming the role of national spokesman only when compatible with his status in parliament. Page's vision of an entire nation restructured along regional lines further distinguished him from the bulk of the movement and made him an important link to the wider regionalism that later evolved from new statism. Ellis and Thompson were among his few consistent allies as he outgrew northern New South Wales and put himself to the even harder task of reorganising all Australia into his federal units.

Page's 'spirit of Oxford or Cambridge'

Involvement in the new state movement between the wars fortuitously drew Page to an important related issue. New state advocates had long contrasted educational facilities in rural areas, especially for higher education, with what was available to city dwellers. Most of the leading proponents of a new university to be located in Armidale, notably Drummond, were also ardent new staters. Their long campaign led to an appeal to Page to lend his support as the north's most prominent public figure. His subsequent involvement helped mark him as one of Australia's few political advocates of higher education as a valued end in itself.

When Page began his public career in the 1910s, mass primary education was well established. But public secondary education had barely begun, tertiary education on an appreciable scale was still decades away and the entire management of state education was centralised in capital cities. Campaigning by the Country Party and its antecedents for better educational opportunities in rural areas dated back to the 1890s and mainly concerned primary, technical and agricultural schooling. Between the wars, this was particularly strong in New South Wales and acquired an additional focus on tertiary education.⁶⁴ The Cohen Royal Commission recommended that all new teachers' colleges in the state be based in the countryside, that local governments play a role in education and that

64 James Belshaw, 'David Henry Drummond 1927–1941: A case study in the politics of education', *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal and Proceedings*, no. 26, March 1983, p. 47; Alan Barcan, *A History of Australian Education*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1980, p. 244.

consideration be given to a university for rural-based students.⁶⁵ Such goals had Drummond's support as state education minister 1927–30 and 1932–41, leading to the establishment of the Armidale Teachers' College in 1928. Despite his long-standing commitment to education, Page was not especially prominent in early campaigning for rural tertiary institutions other than as an aspect of his engagement with new statism. He included the absence of a university in the north in his evidence to the Cohen Royal Commission, but other new state advocates such as the New England pastoralist Colin Sinclair (the sole dissenting member of the royal commission) and the indefatigable Thompson were more consistently focused on this.⁶⁶

Page was asked to join the New England University cause just as it was becoming more organised, a decade after the royal commission. In July 1934 the secretary of the Provisional Council raising funds for a university college invited him both to join the council and to lead a delegation to Drummond.⁶⁷ In November 1938, Page became chairman of the Advisory Council for the newly established New England University College, responsible to the University of Sydney as the college's parent body. This was alongside a solidly rural elite membership of local graziers, town-based professionals and Country Party figures that included the fellow ardent new staters Phillip Wright and Bruxner. Once fully on board, his political rank and familiar energy soon made him prominent. Drummond later wrote of Page's 'great and widespread influence' as comparable to that of eminent chancellors of Sydney University, Percival Halse Rogers and Charles Blackburn.⁶⁸

Campaigning for a fully fledged University of New England led Page towards a vision of tertiary education that drew on his broader philosophy of rural community and of the proper scale of social institutions. He came to see rural-based universities not only as important local amenities but also as means of community-building and shaping. Page told

65 Parker, 'Why New States?', p. 11.

66 Page, *The New State in Northern New South Wales*, pp. 17–18; also Matthew Jordan, *A Spirit of True Learning: The Jubilee History of the University of New England*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2004, pp. 25–6.

67 R.L. Blake and J. Laurence to Page, letter, 17 July 1934, EPP, folder 1788.

68 David Drummond, *A University Is Born: The Story of the Founding of the University of New England*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1959, pp. xviii–xix, 70.

Drummond in late 1938 of how he saw the new institution in Armidale as having ‘an extraordinary influence ultimately on the development and concentration of rural thought in Australia’.⁶⁹ He foresaw that:

It is by having in the centre of these northern districts an institution of this sort, with teachers able to make personal contact with the boys and girls that the full advantage of university life may be realised. Within universities such as this, there may be something of the spirit of Oxford or Cambridge, rather than London, for in big cities the commercial over-rides the cultural life.⁷⁰

This is not just an early statement of his concept of an ideal university – small, rural and teaching-focused – but also of Page’s fundamental distaste for cities and commercialism.

Although there was little reaction to these views in the 1930s, they were the starting point of Page’s more fulsome contributions to the national debate on higher education that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s. His vision of rural education based on scale and community went well beyond anything proposed by Drummond, the most prominent Country Party advocate of education during the inter-war years. Although always personally close to Page, Drummond was more conventionally oriented towards vocational education that met the immediate needs of particular regions and industries. Drummond also helped to found Junior Farmers’ Clubs to encourage young people to stay on the land and, under Bertram Stevens, tried unsuccessfully to regionalise technical education via district technical education councils.⁷¹

Transport and agriculture: Page champions cooperative federalism

The 1930s proved more important for cooperative federalism than for new states or rural higher education. Yet this did not start well, as Page began by trying to re-establish institutionalised cooperation in the fraught field of national transport. This mainly served to illustrate the difficulties involved, but did affirm him as Australia’s prime advocate of cooperative federalism.

69 Page to Drummond, 6 December 1938, EPP, folder 1090.

70 Page, November 1938, quoted in Drummond, *A University Is Born*, p. 70.

71 Belshaw, ‘David Henry Drummond 1927–1941’, pp. 51–2, 65; Bruxner’s paper ‘The Potentialities of Australian Agriculture’, undated, EPP, folder 2308.

Page resumed his engagement with transport, even before the Country Party rejoined the coalition, by pushing the new Lyons Government to revive the Federal Transport Council. In his policy speech for the 1931 election he promised to re-establish the council so as to 'co-ordinate the activities of road, rail, sea, and air transport services to ensure that each branch of the service is fully utilised in those avenues of work for which they are best suited', a step towards the ultimate goal of 'the greatest degree of progress and development'.⁷² The Governor-General's speech at the opening of the new parliament in February 1932 mentioned this council, and Page used his address-in-reply to again call for its revival.⁷³ Public service advice to the Minister for the Interior a few months later acknowledged Page's pressure by warning that 'apart altogether from the urgency of the problem, it is clear from recent press statements that the transport question will be made a live one by the Country Party immediately the House meets'.⁷⁴

Page had a receptive audience. State governments in the early 1930s were increasingly concerned by financial losses inflicted on their rail systems by road transport, and raised this at a series of ministerial meetings. In September 1932, Lyons proposed the re-establishment of a ministerial council for transport. A June 1933 conference of transport ministers discussed amalgamating railways under a national railway corporation, itself responsible to a federal transport council with a brief to promote national uniformity and conduct investigations, but only served to illustrate the fragility of cooperative federalism by promptly falling foul of state opposition.⁷⁵ Page almost alone continued to promote the institutionalised coordination of transport. In his policy speech for the 1934 election he proposed that a central purchasing authority set railway fares and uniform rates for the entire nation.⁷⁶ Page later took time out from 1936 trade talks in London to cable Lyons about engaging Northcott, the chair of the 1929 Commonwealth Transport Committee, to conduct a study of overseas transport policy.⁷⁷

72 Australian Country Party, *Honesty, Security: A Frank Statement of Country Party Policy by Dr Earle Page*, Bureau of Publicity, Information and Research, Sydney, 1931, p. 11.

73 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 18 February 1932, pp. 95–6.

74 'Notes for Speech by the Minister for the Interior – the Federal Transport Council', August 1932, NAA, A431, 1946/888.

75 Lyons to Premiers, 30 September 1932, EPP, folder 489; NAA, A659, 1939/1/8829; memo of 8 June 1935 reporting on conference of transport ministers, EPP, folder 495; brief for Minister of the Interior, EPP, folder 492.

76 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 295.

77 Page to Lyons, cable, 10 July 1936, EPP, folder 496.

To work, federal-led coordination needed either the imposition of the Commonwealth's fiscal power or a common self-interest in responding to a clearly pressing national issue. Page harnessed the latter to successfully establish the Australian Agricultural Council (AAC), the most important and lasting of state–Commonwealth policy coordination bodies. As early as 1925 he had proposed a Commonwealth department of agriculture to coordinate the production and marketing of agricultural exports.⁷⁸ Creation of a Commonwealth–state entity took a decade longer and only after a clash with Britain over trade policy provided a *casus belli*. Like most of his initiatives in this decade, it had its origins in Page's talent for turning an unexpected problem into an opportunity.

Early in 1933 the Lyons Government received a proposal from the British Government to cut imports of Australian dairy produce. Cabinet – then still without Country Party members – reacted surprisingly favourably, reasoning that a smaller local industry would recover more quickly from the Depression.

Page was temporarily absent from parliament at the time following the sudden death of his eldest son on 14 January 1933, struck by lightning when driving cattle to Heifer Station. Earle junior had completed veterinary studies at Sydney University and was managing the station. His father's account in *Truant Surgeon* tells of his other son Iven riding through the storm to another nearby homestead for help, after which vague news reached Heifer Station. Earle senior rushed forth to nearby Copmanhurst where the body had been taken to a doctor's surgery and there confirmed the worst. So shaken was Page that he initially proposed resigning the Country Party leadership and even considered dropping out of parliament entirely. Drummond's regard for Page was so immense that he feared that without him the federal party 'would be very close to a leaderless rabble' that would not survive in federal politics. Ethel Page suffered a stroke but recovered sufficiently to continue her role in family and public life.⁷⁹ After some persuasion, it was agreed that Paterson would act as leader while Page took nine months leave from active politics, an unprecedented break for this otherwise tireless campaigner.

78 Undated minute 'Department of Agriculture', EPP, folder 2128. Ellis indicates it was prepared for Cabinet in 1925; see *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 102.

79 Drummond to Harold F. White, 31 January 1934, Drummond papers, UNE Archives, A248, V3010, folder B, part 4; see also Page, *Truant Surgeon*, pp. 225–6, 263.

This absence did not change Page's policy outlook nor, ultimately, his determination. He was aghast when he heard about Cabinet's intention to comply with 'this shattering proposal' from the British, not least as Grafton was a dairy producing area.⁸⁰ The major trade issue otherwise facing Australia at this time was trade diversification by Britain that restricted Australian exports, and so he riposted that the British should instead cut their dairy imports from non-Empire nations. This led to his proposing, in a series of speeches over the following year, the establishment of the AAC 'on the lines of the Australian Loan Council', to 'elevate agriculture to its proper place in our national life and make Australia realise its value and importance'.⁸¹ Page was drawing on his established ideas about coordinated national action to fight for the sector of the economy that mattered most directly to him.

The AAC had a partial forerunner in the Standing Committee on Agriculture, created in 1927 under the aegis of the CSIR and originally focused on research cooperation between the Commonwealth and the states. It is widely accepted that Page was the main mover behind the establishment of the AAC as a much more influential ministerial body; the Rural Reconstruction Commission, for example, later matter-of-factly described him as such.⁸² Page misleadingly assured the Graziers' Federal Council in December 1934 that the AAC was 'purely a consultative and advisory body'.⁸³ But his other statements were more expansive. In his 1934 election policy speech, Page called the AAC 'a board of directors for Australian agriculture' that would 'eliminate needless waste of public and private capital' and 'counteract restriction policies'.⁸⁴ In a November 1934 Cabinet submission he made clear that although the British trade proposal was the immediate motivation for creating the AAC, the split of agricultural policy responsibility between the Commonwealth (exports) and the states (domestic production) necessitated a mechanism for their working together. Page foresaw 'an intimate form of consultation between Commonwealth and states on the whole question of agricultural policy

80 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, pp. 391–2.

81 Speech by Page at Bellingen, 21 March 1933, quoted in *Truant Surgeon*, p. 232; also his 1934 election policy speech, referred to in Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 213.

82 Rural Reconstruction Commission, *Tenth Report, Commercial Policy in Relation to Agriculture*, The Commission, Canberra, 1946, p. 197.

83 Page to Graziers' Federal Council, 5 December 1934, EPP, folder 183 (part 2).

84 Speech reproduced in *The Australian Country Party Monthly Journal*, vol. 1, no. 8, 1 September 1934, p. 7.

similar to the existing form of consultation in financial policy through the Loan Council'.⁸⁵ Privately, he wrote to his wife in March 1935 revealing how dearly he wanted a powerful planning body:

I think I have a chance to do for agriculture in Australia what I have already done for finance – only agriculture must be organised as well in its different industries in addition to having a national policy laid down and that takes a tremendous amount of time and knowledge to find out just what are the right lines and what is the right method to follow. But I feel that with the extraordinary capable head of the Department I have picked up in Murphy – who has a forward constructive courageous mind something like my own backed by an immense amount of knowledge he has acquired since the B/P [Bruce–Page] Govt established the Development Commission, that I will be able not merely to create an organisation but to breathe the breath of life into it so that it will grow into one of the fundamental factors [of] our national scheme of government and of progress.⁸⁶

'Murphy' is J.F. (Frank) Murphy, secretary of the Department of Commerce 1934–45 and one of the few public servants Page spoke of effusively.

The AAC was formally created at a December 1934 ministerial conference. It consisted primarily of agriculture ministers but with other ministers attending when necessary: the May 1935 inaugural meeting was considered important enough for representation from the states to also include no less than six premiers and acting premiers, with two state attorneys-general in tow. Supporting the ministers was the Standing Committee on Agriculture, comprised mainly of public service heads of agricultural agencies and CSIR's executive leadership. Page agreed that agendas were to be prepared from submissions put forward by the states, plus 'subjects which directly affect the Commonwealth'.⁸⁷ Unlike the Loan Council, the AAC remained a voluntary organisation rather than a statutory body with a constitutional basis. Despite its origins in a trade policy crisis it was, in practice, more heavily engaged with domestic policy. The inaugural meeting worked its way through a long agenda that

85 Cabinet paper, 'Australian Agricultural Council', signed by Page, 20 November 1934, EPP, folder 182.

86 Page to Ethel Page, 10 March 1935, copy provided by Helen Snyders.

87 'Proceedings and Decisions of Council, Australian Agricultural Council, First Meeting, 28, 29, 30 May 1935', p. 63, EPP, folder 2630.

reads like a stocktake of issues, from the organisation of the dairy industry to debt relief for farmers, the powers of marketing boards, soil erosion, wire netting, food preservation, the Wheat Royal Commission and the grasshopper problem. The expansiveness evident here is highly suggestive of Page's influence.

Although the AAC was never as powerful or planning-oriented as Page wanted, it quickly became central to agricultural policy and an important example of how coordinating machinery could smooth a complex, still unresolved federation. Its cast of ministers and their most senior officials debated issues vigorously and in full. Victoria's Agriculture Minister Edmond Hogan and his Queensland counterpart Frank Bulcock were especially vocal. (Hogan was a one-time Labor premier who defected to the Country Party, the two parties in Victoria then having a close relationship). From the start, the AAC promoted voluntary cooperative federalism by resolving that the states pass nationally consistent legislation, such as a proposal at its first meeting to set restrictive terms for the marketing of margarine.⁸⁸ (These terms concerned the colour of margarine so as to clearly differentiate it from butter.)

The AAC succeeded largely as it was based on cooperation amongst equals, rather than the Page-led arrangement he had fondly imagined. Page was often the initiator, but discovered that his state counterparts were very prepared to query his judgement. The biggest single issue facing the early AAC was the implications for orderly marketing legislation of section 92 of the Constitution prohibiting restriction on free trade between the states, specifically whether it invalidated Commonwealth orderly marketing legislation to the extent that this sought to regulate interstate trade. At the inaugural meeting there were very mixed responses to Page's dire warning that 'chaos will prevail' should the courts decide that section 92 did indeed apply to the Commonwealth, and his proposal for a referendum to alter this section. Victoria's premier and agriculture minister, Albert Dunstan and Hogan, bluntly warned of a failed referendum creating further problems; South Australia opposed compulsory schemes led by the Commonwealth; and Western Australia only reluctantly offered support. Proceedings ended in indecision by the issue merely being referred to a committee of all attorneys-general.⁸⁹

88 *Ibid.*, pp. 27–8; NAA, A11702, 3.

89 'Proceedings and Decisions of Council, Australian Agricultural Council, First Meeting, 28, 29, 30 May 1935', pp. 14, 23, EPR, folder 2630.

The centrality and versatility of the AAC is reflected in Page using it to develop a national response to the 1934–36 Royal Commission on the Wheat, Flour and Bread Industries. The agreed response to its findings involved a home consumption price, compulsory marketing and the licensing of flour millers and warehouses, all to be organised jointly by the Commonwealth and the states.⁹⁰ Criticisms of the AAC only emerged a decade later: in 1946 the Rural Reconstruction Commission (RRC) said it had ‘not realized the high hopes of its founder’ due to political considerations leading to the ‘absence of a really national outlook’.⁹¹ The RRC concluded that although such a ministerial body was essential, to work well it needed to be backed by an industry-led hierarchy of local, state and national bodies based on farming industry representation and focused on the responsibilities of farmers rather than their perceived rights. The prominent and intellectually uncompromising agricultural scientist Samuel Wadham disparaged the Standing Committee as having proposed schemes ‘frequently difficult to administer or inequitable in their effects’, as some of its member Commonwealth officials ‘were not fully versed’ in agricultural industries.⁹² The AAC still had post-war defenders, such as public servant F.O. Grogan who said it was ‘perhaps not an exaggeration to suggest it is the most successful example of such cooperation in Australian Commonwealth–State relationships’.⁹³

The AAC was nonetheless much more successful than its ineffectual transport counterpart. The British trade issue gave the AAC a strong initial impetus: it was built on cooperation between governments in orderly marketing that dated back to the 1920s; government action was supported by producers; much agriculture competed internationally rather than nationally, easing interstate rivalry; and industries that produce homogenous products tend to experience common problems. The AAC was to be the main means by which Page consolidated co-operative

90 See text on wheat marketing policy, briefing note on orderly marketing schemes prepared for the Rural Reconstruction Commission, typed copy in EPP folder 2630, pp. 22–4; also Page, *Truant Surgeon*, pp. 236–8.

91 Rural Reconstruction Commission, *Tenth Report*, pp. 197, 201.

92 L.R. Humphries, *Wadham: Scientist for Land and People*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, 2000, p. 138.

93 F.O. Grogan, ‘The Australian Agricultural Council: A successful experiment in Commonwealth–state relations’, *Public Administration*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1958, p. 12; J.G. Crawford, *Australian Agricultural Policy*, The Joseph Fisher Lecture in Commerce, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, 1952, pp. 47–8.

federalism in policy formulation. It operated by its original name up to 1992 and has a current equivalent in the form of the Agriculture Ministers' Forum.

Page was encouraged by the early success of the AAC. Typical of his optimism and ambition, he proceeded to call for a veritable constellation of voluntary coordinating councils. A 'parliament of governments' would serve as 'a kind of super-Senate' across agriculture, transport, health and social services without any need to amend the Constitution.⁹⁴ Praise for Page's efforts on cooperative federalism came from a familiar source, F.A. Bland. Speaking in 1935 on his efforts to revive the Federal Transport Council, Bland called for the 'elimination of political control' by using statutory policy commissions as advocated by Page.⁹⁵ He also praised Page in *Australian Quarterly*, then Australia's main current affairs journal, for his roles in creating the Loan Council and the AAC, and how he had been 'at considerable pains to popularize his ideas' by proposing similar new councils. Bland concluded that 'these proposals of Dr Earle Page not only prelude an eventful chapter in working the Federal system, but offer unlimited possibilities for inventiveness in the arts of public administration'.⁹⁶ In a draft letter a few years later to Casey, then treasurer, Page again mooted new bodies for coordination in transport and communications, so that the Commonwealth would 'be able to call a national tune with some real harmony in it'.⁹⁷

Page used the AAC to respond nationally to the most serious inter-war challenge to orderly marketing. The result showed the limitations of co-operative federalism and marked a shift in his approach to constitutional reform. A South Australian dried fruit grower, Frederick James, so strongly objected to state and Commonwealth authorities seizing his shipments to enforce orderly marketing legislation regulating interstate trade that he pursued a long series of legal challenges right up to the Privy Council. Essentially, the orderly marketing schemes he challenged elevated domestic prices to compensate for low export prices, and imposed production quotas set by the states and export quotas set by the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth legislation also

94 'Dr Page's New Plan - National Co-ordination councils - parliament of governments', *The Australian Country Party Monthly Journal*, vol. 2., no. 18, 1 July 1935, p. 3.

95 F.A. Bland, *An Administrative Approach to Australian Transport Problems*, lecture to the New South Wales Centre of the Institute of Transport, Sydney, 1935, copy in EPP, folder 489.

96 Bland, 'Inventing constitutional machinery', *Australian Quarterly*, pp. 19, 21.

97 Page to Casey, EPP, folder 407; undated draft, but evidently from 1938-39.

regulated interstate marketing of primary products, the focus of the Privy Council's ruling. In July 1936 the council declared that section 92 of the Constitution applied to the Commonwealth, thereby effectively striking down its legislation concerning such marketing for dried fruits, dairy products and wheat. This decision validated Page's earlier warnings but came at a difficult time for him. As commerce minister he was already struggling in trade talks with Britain on the beef trade. What followed gave him a focus for his determination to change the Constitution, and drew forth a string of Page pronouncements that made him its leading public critic.

The James case led the AAC to finally accept Page's calls for a constitutional amendment. The resultant March 1937 referendum proposed enabling the Commonwealth to make laws on marketing without being inhibited by section 92, with a concurrent referendum to give it powers over air navigation. Page in campaigning mode showed absolutely no reverence for the Constitution. He spoke of its 'faulty wording' thwarting Commonwealth action and of how 'no real democracy' would accept such restraints. The referendum was 'a straight-out fight for the maintenance of Australian living standards'.⁹⁸ Similarly, 'it is obvious' that aviation was a continental rather than a local matter, despite which the states had failed to collectively legislate and the High Court had invalidated Commonwealth regulations. Page cast these referenda as harbingers of a 'general Constitutional referendum' to fully revamp this troublesome document.⁹⁹

Yet there turned out to be little public appetite for change. The question on marketing was rejected in all six states. The aviation referendum also failed, albeit less comprehensively. The strength of the 'no' votes was met with widespread bafflement. The *Sydney Morning Herald* postulated that it was simply a generalised protest against the Lyons Government. Page concluded that in future the only way to educate the public and win approval for change was through a constitutional convention.¹⁰⁰ He had been supported by other ministers only to the extent of protecting orderly marketing; few, if any, echoed his wider condemnation of the entire Constitution. Page had led a major revival of cooperative federalism but

98 'Statement by the Minister for Commerce (Dr Earle Page) 2nd March 1937', EPP, folder 934.

99 Document titled 'Referendum Campaign', no author or date but wording and internal references clearly suggest Page in 1937, EPP, folder 2140.

100 Both comments from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 March 1937, p. 8.

needed a specific and material issue to do so and could not extend this to broader constitutional reform. Following the failure of this referendum, the AAC during 1938 successfully reformulated a coherent strategy for wheat based on complementary legislation by the Commonwealth and the states, along with a voluntary arrangement for dried fruits based on complementary state legislation.

Page's calls to protect orderly marketing again indicate that although such schemes were significant to him, he still treated them as being of secondary significance, components of his wider view of the nation's workings. During the referendum campaign, he linked orderly marketing to his long-standing goal of balancing the entire economy. The Commonwealth needed to regulate interstate trade so as to give primary producers protection comparable to that provided to manufacturers. Without farmers being able to afford to buy factory produce, manufacturing and ultimately the whole economy would falter; indeed, he considered this the cause of 'the late Depression'. Legislation had protected dried fruit and dairy producers since the 1920s by manipulating production and prices, but had only lately been extended to wheat – hence, concluded Page, the latter's persistent need to be subsidised.¹⁰¹ Page maintained a wider policy vision than nearly all his Country Party colleagues, most of whom during the referendum campaign were otherwise preoccupied with a home consumption price for wheat, recommendations concerning rural loans by a Royal Commission on Banking and yet another Victoria-based party rift over coalitions.

In the March 1935 letter to his wife, Page had reflected on his work in creating the AAC as part of his higher calling. It was a fine example of a policy 'which has an infinitely greater and more far reaching effect on the happiness and welfare of the people of Australia than any work I could do in my profession or running my own place'. After dwelling briefly on the pressures he had faced in public life, he exulted in 'the pleasure and the joy in altruistic constructive work that will lift the standards of living and comfort of us all and specially of the country people for ever and make certain that my spirit lives after I am gone'. He concluded that 'my spirit would rest better if I felt that the torch I have lighted and borne would still flame through the world perhaps to illumine it fully'.¹⁰² Page fully retained the driving sense of special purpose that imbued his

101 Document titled 'Referendum Campaign', EPP, folder 2140.

102 Page to Ethel Page, 10 March 1935.

1917 speech, viewing even the AAC as an inspiring opportunity to leave a legacy. Three years later, he was to attempt a yet grander policy creation, the National Council.

Electrification re-sparked

During the early to mid-1930s, Page's successive preoccupation with the northern new state, building a coalition with the UAP and establishing the AAC resulted in his standing back from the Clarence and electrification. He still considered electrification an essential part of his vision, but was inhibited by a low level of wider political engagement with developmentalism and an absence of professional interest in hydroelectricity. When the Depression receded in the latter 1930s, Page resumed his pursuit of electrification as a key to national development. As with new states, he seized unexpected opportunities, briefly restoring him as Australia's foremost champion of hydroelectricity.

The two initiatives he pursued involved very different approaches, typical of his stress on ends over means. One sought to exploit imperial ties to gain access to technology and investment. The other involved working with Bertram Stevens and his New South Wales government to use state-owned railways as a basis for electrification. Both showed how Page struggled to secure support from urban-based interests, always a severe constraint on his nationwide ambitions. They also suggest that despite the economic recovery of the late 1930s, there was less of a corresponding revival of the developmentalism that had characterised the 1920s. Ambitious development proposals wilted in the face of contrary vested interests: Australian optimism was to take several more years to recover.

During the 1930s, Australian policy on trade, migration and overseas investment remained solidly cast in an imperial context. In 1936 Australia adopted a trade diversion policy of discrimination against Japanese and US exporters in favour of British suppliers, the aim being to secure better access to the British market by offering tariff concessions on British manufactures. Page went along with this strategy, challenging it only at the margins such as by occasionally proposing migration and tourism from the United States and continental Europe.¹⁰³ Page rushed to London

¹⁰³ See for example his 1929 exchange of letters with Leslie H. Perdrian (?) of Cambridge, Massachusetts, on promoting Australia as a tourist destination; Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 10, folder 78.

in 1936 to appeal to the British Government not to shift meat imports to Argentina, considered by the Australians to be a direct threat to the principles of the Ottawa Agreement. Page on international missions had a habit of digressing into initiatives more directly geared to his own idea of Australian development. Having secured an acceptable agreement that protected Australian beef exports to Britain for the next three years, he set out to negotiate with the British Board of Trade what even he called an ambitious scheme for electrification based on British technology, finance and migration.

Page had long seen the imperial connection as a powerful platform for Australian development. As long before as September 1920, he and William Corin had corresponded on working with the Canadians to convene an imperial conference 'on the question of water power in the Empire'.¹⁰⁴ Page now sought to harness British interest in overseas investment in manufacturing and in coordinating industrial development within the Empire, both responses to the Depression-related breakdown of multilateral trade. Although based on the imperial connection, Page's strategy is broadly consistent with interpretations of Australian trade policy of the time as being driven more by national development policy than by any slavish attachment to imperial sentiment.¹⁰⁵

Page and the Board of Trade tentatively agreed on the tariff-free entry of advanced heavy capital equipment into Australia for at least 10 years, the resumption of large-scale British migration, and either the British Electrical Association or the British Government itself arranging a long-term loan to extend 'electrical reticulation' throughout Australia.¹⁰⁶ 'The heads of electrical manufacturing concerns', Page later recalled, offered to 'bring out 58,000 migrants drawn from all classes and make available £30 million to enable governments to increase their electricity supplies and expand reticulation if they received certain concessions concerning the admission of major and very specialised electrical equipment.'¹⁰⁷ This proposal had a strong precedent dating from the 1920s when British legislation guaranteed finance for power

104 Corin to Page, 17 September 1920, EPP, folder 400.

105 Such as A.T. Ross, 'Australian overseas trade and national development policy 1932–1939: A story of colonial larrikins or Australian statesmen?', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1990, pp. 184–204.

106 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 245.

107 Speech, 28 July 1958, Perth, National Party of Australia records, NLA, MS 7507, series 1, box 1.

development overseas that used British-produced plant.¹⁰⁸ Now Page was taking it upon himself to revive singlehandedly the Migration Agreement of that decade.

He claimed to have secured the support of British industry and of all but one of Australia's state manufacturing associations. Typical of his ready faith in the private sector, he fully expected them to proceed to resolve among themselves such details as the technical definitions of specific goods.¹⁰⁹ He was mortified to instead find his ambitious plan 'blocked by certain Australian manufacturing interests'.¹¹⁰ He publicly blamed the engineer and UAP state parliamentarian F.P. Kneeshaw, long a critic of the Ottawa Agreement's concessions to Britain and president of the only state association opposed to Page's proposal, the New South Wales Chamber of Manufactures.¹¹¹ In a speech to the Country Party federal executive in July 1958 recounting his long engagement with electrification, Page attributed this failure more fundamentally to a lack of national ambition: 'Australia failed to take up the offer, which typifies what still could be done if the will exists'.¹¹²

Page's only significant domestic ally on electrification during the late 1930s was Stevens. In his policy speech for the 1935 state election, Stevens declared an intention to create a statewide grid based on coal and hydroelectricity, including the Nymboida facility and new hydroelectric plants on the Shoalhaven and other rivers.¹¹³ The premier's convergent agenda encouraged Page to resume a long-standing interest in using New South Wales railways as a basis for rural electrification, something he first explored during the 1920s. The New South Wales Railways and Tramways Department had played a central role in electrification during the early twentieth century, partially acting as a statewide electricity authority by using its generators to supply power in bulk to local government distribution authorities.¹¹⁴ In the late 1930s New South Wales had no

108 Cochrane, *Industrialisation and Dependence: Australia's Road to Economic Development*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld, 1980, p. 38.

109 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 245.

110 Memo by Page of 30 January 1950 on the new Department of National Development, EPP, folder 2072.

111 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 245.

112 Speech, 28 July 1958, NLA, MS 7507, series 1, box 1.

113 Wigmore, *Struggle for the Snowy: The Background of the Snowy Mountains Scheme*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1968, p. 93.

114 See Butlin, Barnard and Pincus, *Government and Capitalism*, pp. 254–5; also 'Memorandum on the Development and Organisation of the Electricity Supply Industry in New South Wales', by H.R. Harper, formerly chief engineer, State Electricity Commission of Victoria, 1938, p. 2, EPP, folder 1059.

less than six different electricity providers, including the Clarence River County Council focused on hydroelectricity. A central power authority appeared only gradually in New South Wales, between 1938 and 1950.¹¹⁵

In November 1936, Page sought an opinion on rural electrification from Australian General Electric's Tim Clapp, a favoured Page sounding-board in the business world. Clapp's advice was that the only practical strategy was through 'electrification of part of the main lines of the New South Wales Government Railways'. But he added that the load was too small to enable electricity to be supplied at low cost: as ever, sparse population and distance were fundamental constraints.¹¹⁶ Yet just two months later, Stevens submitted an ambitious plan to his Cabinet that drew on discussions with Page and his own recent visits to Sweden and Britain. This proposed rural electrification using 'tapering subsidies' flagged a new central power authority empowered to raise its own funds and reported that the state's Electricity Advisory Committee was preparing a long-term strategy to link major power stations.¹¹⁷ That Page's personal papers include a copy of a New South Wales Cabinet document is indicative of his ties to Stevens.

Most of Page's political colleagues showed little interest in such ambitions. An April 1939 conference in Sydney of Commonwealth and state ministers on water conservation and irrigation in calling for Commonwealth funding and a nationwide survey of water resources barely mentioned hydroelectricity.¹¹⁸ Page, caretaker prime minister at the time, did not attend. Stevens was removed from the premiership by opponents within his own party in August 1939, partly in consequence of his being considered too close to the Country Party.

115 Allbut, *A Brief History of Some of the Features of Public Electricity Supply in Australia*, pp. 31–2.

116 Clapp to Page, 17 November 1936, EPP, folder 2086.

117 Cabinet minute by Stevens, 12 January 1937, EPP, folder 2612.

118 *Interstate Conference on Water Conservation and Irrigation: Held at Sydney, New South Wales 24th to 27th April, 1939*, Government Printer, Sydney, 1939, copy at EPP, folder 2111.

The National Council planning initiative, 1938–39: Page sets out to shape the nation

Page's last major policy initiative of the 1930s also arose from an unexpected opportunity, this time mounting defence concerns. The National Council planning proposal of 1938–39 was a determined effort to recreate the DMC in a more powerful form. This effort to change the very fundamentals of national policy-making was by far Page's most ambitious attempt to realise his vision of Australia's development. He concentrated all of his formidable energy onto this, only to find its failure commensurately dismaying. It is well documented, including a full transcript of the October 1938 conference with the premiers at which Page first sought their commitment.

The National Council initiative briefly held the attention of the Commonwealth and all state governments. It helped to make economic planning an issue that lingered intermittently for the next two and a half decades. Yet it is mentioned only in a few histories of the period. Even the most detailed account, that by Paul Hasluck, does not fully recognise Page's dominant role and developmentalist aims, which were muddled by overlapping machinations concerning defence preparedness. Anne Henderson, in her biography of Lyons, provides an outline that does acknowledge Page's leading role and national development ambitions.¹¹⁹ Most other histories of Australian foreign and defence policy of the late 1930s do not cover the National Council at all, mentioning Page only to note that post-1939 he was coy about his earlier support for appeasement.¹²⁰

An understanding of Page's wider thinking and of the course of events makes it very clear that the foremost driver was his planning-based decentralist agenda. Asserting himself over his prime minister to call two conferences of state premiers on this issue was the high-water mark of Page's political influence in the 1930s, but also marks the start of his

119 Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1939–41*, series 4 (Civil), volume 1, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1952, pp. 125–37; Henderson, *Joseph Lyons*, pp. 414–15.

120 See for example E.M. Andrews, *Isolationism and Appeasement in Australia: Reactions to the European Crises 1935–1939*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1970, p. 141.

decline. This singular episode is also an illuminating case study of Page's modus operandi, notably his blunt attempts to win over political colleagues and the states, and his misplaced optimism that business leaders would empathise with his developmentalist goals.

A new planning body had been proposed by then Opposition leader John Latham in late 1930. This was to be a non-party 'economic council' that could take charge during the crisis of the Depression, made up of federal and state political leaders – including Page – and of bankers. The then acting treasurer Joseph Lyons raised the idea with the Labor Caucus, which reportedly reacted with derision, possibly as members perceived collusion with the Opposition.¹²¹ The Loan Council and premiers' conferences acted as an economic council during the Depression, but Page later publicly dismissed the deflationary Premiers' Plan of 1931 as 'an accountant's plan, not a statesman's plan' that misguidedly tried to 'tax people into prosperity'.¹²² Revival of a DMC-like agency as a more powerful agent of developmentalism was one of his first proposals following the demise of the Scullin Government. In February 1932 he told the Constitutional Association of New South Wales that because of unplanned and unbalanced development 'we had peacocked industry as we had peacocked settlement'.¹²³

Over the following two years, Page repeatedly called for a powerful federal export council of federal and state ministers as a statutory authority 'formed on the lines of the Loan Council, and given status and powers in the same way so far as the exporting industries are concerned'. This would 'rationalise' these industries and so 'direct our marginal producers into more profitable and stable lines of activity'. It would 'ensure for a definite term a payable Australian price' for exports that could later come down as lower tariffs reduced costs. This would be quite unlike 'the hopeless policy [of] giving bounties year after year to the wheat industry'. Like so many Page initiatives, he linked the federal export council to a currently topical issue – in this case, tariff reform. He tied the reduction of tariffs not just to 'harmony between the prices of the farm and the factory goods', but also to the restoration of world trade as 'lowered tariffs will enable investment

121 Cochrane, *Industrialisation and Dependence*, p. 126; see the *Launceston Examiner*, 11 December 1930, p. 7, for a detailed account of the Caucus reaction.

122 Quoted in a profile of Page in the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 14 August 1948, pp. 10–11.

123 Speech by Page of 15 February 1932 to the Constitutional Association, EPP, folder 384.

by creditor nations of their capital in equipment of debtor nations, and the debtor countries will be able to pay their interest again in the form of goods'.¹²⁴

The federal export council idea and planning generally attracted little political reaction in the early 1930s. Governments were far more preoccupied with fiscal restraint. Later in the decade, rearmament and intellectual interest in planning gave Page a firmer basis for his National Council initiative. In brief, Page in 1938–39 sought to enlist ministers and experts from business and government with knowledge of manufacturing, agriculture, defence and engineering so as to direct national industry, trade, transport and energy policy across a timespan of several years. The resultant planning body would 'ignore state boundaries' in guiding the location of industries and the prioritisation of public works as it mounted an 'attack [on] the causes of excessive population in the vulnerable centres'.¹²⁵ Although bracketing development with defence was not a new idea in Australia, this was usually stated in simpler terms of the size and distribution of the nation's population, particularly in the sparsely populated north. Page's distinctive approach was to use growing security concerns and defence preparedness as a basis for seeking to plan the entire economy.

Tentative moves to ready the nation for war had begun in 1935 when the Australian Government consulted the states and industry on the content of the Commonwealth War Book, a detailed set of procedures to be followed upon the outbreak of war. By the time Page proposed the National Council in September 1938, preparations had already spawned an array of expert planning committees of officials, economists and business leaders. An Advisory Committee on Financial and Economic Policy included the leading economists L.F. Giblin, Roland Wilson and Leslie Melville, and mobilisation of secondary industry sat with an advisory panel chaired by BHP's formidable general manager Essington Lewis. Page would have been encouraged by increases in defence expenditure initiated by Lyons and Casey in 1937, a marked shift from the austerity of the previous few years as unemployment fell. This included a December

124 'Federal Export Council Proposed by Dr Earle Page for Continuous Australian Policy', speech by Page of 20 November 1933 to the Triennial Convention of the Australian Country Party Association, David Henry Drummond papers, UNE Archives, A248, V3010, folder 2(c). See also 'Speech by the Rt. Hon. Dr Earle Page MP, P.C., at the Western Divisional Conference of the United Country Party at Orange on Thursday February 22 1934', EPP, folder 1101.

125 'Memorandum to Cabinet', 18 October 1938, EPP, folder 1114.

1937 Cabinet direction to the Department of Works to give priority to defence projects.¹²⁶ Total defence expenditure climbed from 5.5 per cent of annual expenditure in 1933–34 to 9.4 per cent in 1936–37, and would reach 14.9 per cent by 1938–39.¹²⁷

Page also gained some traction from growing intellectual interest in planning arising from the search for responses to the Depression. This, for the first and only time in his life, brought him into a willing alliance with professional economists. Planning was the subject of only the second summer school ever held by the Australian Institute of Political Science, in January 1934 in Canberra. Page did not attend, but the event still boasted an impressive cast of public policy intellectuals that included G.V. Portus, W. Macmahon Ball, Lloyd Ross, E.O.G. Shann, Leslie Melville, the Reverend E.H. Burgmann, Alan Watt, Bland, Wilson and Giblin. Discussion ranged from doubt about the very concept of economic planning to admiration for the USSR, but there was broad acceptance that some limited form of planning was needed to promote efficiency and equity. Bland was one of the few sceptics and condemned centralised planning as 'incompatible with the enjoyment of popular liberties'.¹²⁸

Two participants, Wilson and Giblin, were later important players in Page's National Council proposal. In November 1938 Giblin prepared a short paper for Prime Minister Lyons supporting a 'general plan for national reorganisation' of the Commonwealth and the states as essential in this 'new era, in which concentrated and planned effort will have to be made by the people of all the democracies if they are to have a chance to survive'.¹²⁹ Page was also aware of ideas about planning circulating in British intellectual circles, having read G.D.H. Cole's 1935 *Principles of Economic Planning*. (Cole called for the full public ownership of industry, something Page found abhorrent.) In Britain the typical proposed goal

126 A.T. Ross, *Armed and Ready: The Industrial Development & Defence of Australia 1900–1945*, Turton & Armstrong, Sydney, 1995, pp. 113–15, 118.

127 Henderson, *Joseph Lyons*, p. 398.

128 F.A. Bland, *Planning the Modern State*, second edition, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1945 (first published 1934), pp. 67–8. Proceedings of the summer school were published in W.G.K. Duncan (ed.), *National Economic Planning*, Angus and Robertson in conjunction with the Australian Institute of Political Science, Sydney, 1934.

129 L.F. Giblin, 'The National Need', November 1938 (no specific date), EPP, folder 2082; see also Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1939–41*, p. 130.

of economic planning was to stave off crisis by rescuing capitalism from itself; in Australia, Page wanted to engineer the nation at last to fulfil its potential.¹³⁰

A more immediately important factor in the National Council proposal was Page's political resurgence. The late 1930s was a Page purple patch. That he was knighted in the 1938 new year's honours list was the least of it. (Page had also been a Privy Councillor since 1929.) By 1938 he had built a strong personal relationship with Lyons. Enid Lyons recalled Page as being so close to her husband that it was rumoured to be the only known instance of Page being completely loyal to anyone else.¹³¹ His determined efforts to promote the National Council proposal confirms the impression given in *Truant Surgeon* that he was only too willing to fill the vacuum created by Lyons's political and physical decline that would eventually led to his early death from coronary occlusion.

Page led an Australian trade delegation in Britain in 1938 to negotiate a revision of the Ottawa Agreement. These complex and inconclusive discussions dealt with access to each other's markets, the expansion of Australian secondary industry and also an understanding with Britain on trade agreements with third countries. The talks were also infused with growing fear of another major war: Australia's contribution to Empire defence and development was linked to increasing its population, seen by both countries as requiring the growth of secondary industry. Page in his memoirs recalled returning from these talks convinced war was inevitable. He at once 'began exploring means of co-ordinating Federal and State capital expenditure on defence and development and of allocating priorities to indispensable projects'.¹³² Although this started with a proposal for agreement with the states to prioritise public works according to their defence value, the documentation that Page generated dwells far more on his own decentralist and developmentalist goals. There is no indication that he corresponded similarly with defence experts. Page's proposal also closely matched his DMC-inspired model for planning, including using business leaders as advisers and formal machinery for coordination

130 For accounts of British conceptions of planning, see Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain between the Wars*, Allen Lane, London, 2009, pp. 77–86; and Pemberton, 'The middle way', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*.

131 Enid Lyons, *Among the Carrion Crows*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1972, p. 75.

132 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 262.

between levels of government. What followed is a fine example of Earle Page in full flight, utterly determined to seize an opportunity he had hoped for since the glory days of the Bruce–Page Government.

In October 1938 Page forcefully warned the Lyons Cabinet of the need to prepare for war, and so proposed that 'the Federal Government gives a lead and secures the complete cooperation of the other governments and the industrial leaders'. To this end he produced a confidential memo, evidently for Cabinet, entitled 'Financial Problems of Australian Defence and Development'. This earliest of the key documents generated by Page's National Council proposal stands as his magnum opus, a concentrated statement of self-belief devoid of any consideration of alternatives or foreseeable barriers.¹³³ It was clearly written by Page himself (or at least under his very close supervision), containing as it does such characteristic phrases as 'reproductive purposes' and 'it is obvious'.

The memo set out what was formally put to state premiers on 21 October 1938. An opening reference to 'the lessons of the last fortnight' reflects its preparation just after the Munich Agreement of September 1938. Australia's security necessitated not just the wise use of funds for defence procurement: Page also wanted 'industrial development in the widest national sense' to mobilise national resources and attract millions of new settlers. As funding through loans was limited, 'the height of wisdom is to plan the spending in the best possible way' by carefully identifying industries for expansion and locating them at the least vulnerable points, while 'promoting the best distribution of population'.¹³⁴

All this would require state cooperation over the 'next seven or ten years' to jointly plan all sectors of the economy. Page also pondered here the possibilities of migration from continental Europe, especially settlers from the Netherlands and Denmark 'who would quickly assimilate the Australian character'.¹³⁵ New secondary industries would be sited at sources of raw materials, especially near seaports: Page thought it fortunate that many potential Australian ports were close to power sources, such as his adored Clarence River. A national electricity system would charge flat

133 See EPP, folder 2121; copies marked October 1938 and bearing Page's signature are at folder 1877 (part 1). Page's statement to the House outlining his plans drew heavily on this document; see *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 19 October 1938, pp. 903–5. Page also produced a memo to Cabinet dated 18 October 1938 providing further details of his intentions, EPP, folder 1114. The quote is from 'Financial Problems of Australian Defence and Development', p. 1.

134 'Financial Problems of Australian Defence and Development', EPP, folder 2121, pp. 1, 2.

135 *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 10.

rates as a 'prime necessity for the decentralisation of industry'.¹³⁶ Planning would apply such tools as uniform railway gauges, tax privileges, new ports and manufacturing distribution centres, guided by 'experts who have the confidence of all Australia'.¹³⁷ As the international political environment darkened, 'now is the psychological moment for a definite call to national service, a national outlook, and a national programme'.¹³⁸ Reviewing the whole economy would also be consistent with agreement at the 1938 trade talks with Britain to assess Australia's lines of development of secondary industry so as to help frame trade policies.¹³⁹ As Page hoped to enshrine national development above party politics, he gave Opposition leader John Curtin an advance copy of his statement to parliament. Curtin noted the lack of detail but still approved sufficiently to claim credit for the ALP in first proposing machinery for collaboration with the states on public works.¹⁴⁰

Page was indeed initially vague on how exactly this planning would be organised. It soon became evident he had in mind appointment by the Loan Council of a powerful joint advisory committee of Commonwealth and state officials and of business leaders.¹⁴¹ This would undertake a 'survey of the lines which Australian industrial development should follow from now on'.¹⁴² It would then submit recommendations to the Loan Council on the prioritisation of public works, including those not directly associated with defence. The most important would be 'reproductive' – electricity, road, railway, seaport and communications projects likely to stimulate production.¹⁴³ Page was effectively recasting the Loan Council, his great policy triumph of the previous decade, as a more powerful version of the DMC with a much more direct say in developmental expenditure.

Page broached his initiative with the convalescent prime minister by letter on 10 October 1938. In order to overcome 'the Loan Council deadlock', Page sought his agreement to a joint meeting of the Commonwealth, states, industry and Opposition to 'combine in one big progressive

136 Ibid., p. 6.

137 'Memorandum to Cabinet', 18 October 1938, EPP, folder 1114.

138 'Financial Problems of Australian Defence and Development', EPP, folder 2121, p. 2.

139 Ibid., p. 2. See Page, *Truant Surgeon*, pp. 394–5, for the relevant formal conclusions of these talks.

140 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 19 October 1938, pp. 905–7.

141 Ibid., 19 October 1938, pp. 903–5.

142 Lyons speech to 21 October 1938 conference of premiers, in Australia, Parliament, *Conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers on National Co-operation for Defence and Development, Proceedings of Conference*, p. 3, copy in EPP, folder 581.

143 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 19 October 1938, p. 904.

programme the Defence activities, the investigation of the plan of industrial development that the delegation arranged with the British Ministers [and] an enquiry into the location of the suggested new industries'.¹⁴⁴ Page also canvassed an old colleague. He wrote to Stanley Bruce, now Australian high commissioner in London, clearly indicating that defence preparedness provided an opportunity to pursue developmental planning: 'It has been quite obvious for some time that the Financial Agreement and the Loan Council would break down except something is done which would give real priority to worthwhile works', for which 'the Defence problem gives us an opportunity of putting this issue on to a plane that the general public can understand'.¹⁴⁵

But attracting the interest of business leaders, always Page's preferred collaborators, proved difficult. He wrote to Essington Lewis, Tim Clapp and Sir Clive McPherson, the pastoralist. The letter to Lewis of 13 October 1938 is one of the most ambitious Page ever wrote. In order to achieve something 'of real and enduring value' for the nation, he sought 'the collaboration of the captains of industry in Australia, who have real vision' and asked for suggested names.¹⁴⁶ But Lewis's reply was characteristically formal, even cold. He had spoken with Robert Menzies (minister for industry and attorney-general) and T.W. White (minister for trade and customs), and thought the government already had access to the 'leading men'. Lewis did briefly list candidate industries for expansion, ranging from cotton and canned vegetables, to aluminium and shipbuilding. Extra protection would be required for them to be decentralised, he added.¹⁴⁷ Clapp and McPherson replied jointly that they would participate only if satisfied that the Commonwealth and states would endorse the recommendations of the 'Board of Control' – a near impossible precondition.¹⁴⁸

The bureaucracy showed more enthusiasm. Page had a detailed memorandum prepared by three senior officials: Murphy of his Department of Commerce; Stuart McFarlane, secretary of the Treasury; and Roland Wilson, now Commonwealth statistician.¹⁴⁹ At the AIPS

144 Page to Lyons, 10 October 1938, EPP, folder 1621.

145 Page to Bruce, 12 October 1938, EPP, folder 407.

146 Page to Lewis, 13 October 1938; to McPherson, 14 October 1938; to Clapp, 12 October 1938; all EPP, folder 407.

147 Lewis to Page, 17 October 1938, EPP, folder 407.

148 Clapp to Page, 18 October 1938, EPP, folder 1621.

149 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 263.

summer school four years earlier, Wilson had called for indicative planning that maintained private property and the profit motive, but with a 'central thinking agency' supervising the private sector.¹⁵⁰ The three public servants now outlined a 10-year plan of cooperative action by the Commonwealth and the states, starting by deciding on which industries to expand and their locations. The memorandum was sent to all state governments.

It says much about Page's influence in Cabinet that he secured support for his ill-defined and overstretched proposal. He was even confident that public opinion could force the states to cooperate.¹⁵¹ Page dismissed likely criticism: the CSIR, the Loan Council and the NHMRC, he said, were all once 'ridiculed as impossible'.¹⁵² He proceeded with two concerted attempts to secure the cooperation of the states. The first was the Conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers on National Co-operation for Defence and Development, convened in the House of Representatives chamber on 21 October 1938. All six state governments were represented, including by four premiers. Discussions were hampered by hurried preparation and a concurrent Loan Council meeting. Page's immediate aim was to have the states agree to participate in the advisory committee to the Loan Council. The results fell far short.

The conference presented a stark contrast between Page's high hopes and the exhaustion of a prime minister in terminal decline. Lyons, 'tired, dispirited and ill', was flown in from his sickbed in Devonport.¹⁵³ Even as he arrived in Canberra he knew the proposal in outline only: Page briefed him on the details during the drive from the airport. Lyons's opening speech was only half ready as he began to deliver it, obliging him to speak slowly while it was typed up and handed to him leaf by leaf.¹⁵⁴ The assembled state ministers would surely have been unimpressed. Even worse, a list of priority projects prepared by the Department of Defence was not ready for presentation.¹⁵⁵ Defence Minister Thorby (the Country Party's deputy leader) had just a week before asked his department to prepare a report

150 Duncan, *National Economic Planning*, p. 68.

151 'Memorandum to Cabinet', 18 October 1938, EPP, folder 1114; also Page to Bruce, 12 October 1938, EPP, folder 407.

152 'Necessity for Planning', undated, EPP, folder 2110.

153 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 235.

154 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 263.

155 Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1939-41*, p. 127.

on public works of defence value. Cabinet only considered the resultant schedule on the day of the conference, and directed that it be revised to list projects in priority order.

Lyons instead broadly outlined to the states what Page had in mind, yet without mentioning him by name. He asked them to agree to the 'transfer of some part of your loan works programme from the works you already have in mind to works which have a defence significance', thereby encouraging projects that 'have a civil as well as a defence value'. The Commonwealth would deal with those works purely of defence significance. But as 'the whole of the defence plan must depend on the successful development of the country's resources and the increase of its wealth and population', there should also be a 'preparation of plans relating to the location of new industries and the public works necessary to ensure their success'. The advisory committee would 'have regard to both economic and strategic factors, including distribution of population and vulnerability of industry' in drafting a program 'of future industrial development' and 'an order of priority of public works'. Commonwealth and state experts could begin by meeting at defence headquarters in Melbourne.¹⁵⁶

The reaction of the states demonstrated that their fear of loss of authority crossed party lines and far outweighed any faith in planning. Dunstan of Victoria was nominally Page's Country Party colleague but argued that the advisory committee should be denied substantive powers and exclude industrialists. Richard Butler of South Australia had similar concerns, despite being willing to countenance decentralisation 'if that can be done economically'.¹⁵⁷ Page himself was widely mistrusted. Initially he kept uncharacteristically quiet and later wrote that discussions were well advanced before the premiers 'recognised me as the author'. Two economic advisers, Douglas Copland from Victoria and Colin Clark of Queensland, wanted to know why his role had not been made clear at the outset.¹⁵⁸ William Forgan Smith, the Labor premier of Queensland, thought that the states risked coercion reminiscent of Page's abolition when treasurer of their per capita grants. This drew an indignant reply from Page that the states had been glad of the Loan Council ever since.¹⁵⁹

156 *Conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers*, EPR, folder 581, pp. 3–4.

157 *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7, 9–11.

158 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 264.

159 *Conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers*, EPR, folder 581, p. 9.

Page's sole supporter was Bertram Stevens, who had already advocated Page's plan in a radio speech 10 days earlier. But even he was concerned by the proposed advisory committee and wanted an assurance of additional finance, including Commonwealth measures to secure the cooperation of the banks.¹⁶⁰

The conference floundered its way to a noncommittal agreement by the states to 'examine the possibility of undertaking, within the limits of the local allocation of that state, any work of defence submitted by the Commonwealth'.¹⁶¹ The whole meeting had lasted two hours, despite allowance for two days. 'Received cautiously by some Premiers' was the understated summary in the Commonwealth's press release of the next day. This reported that the advisory committee had been deferred rather than rejected and that the Commonwealth would seek 'a Committee with abridged powers' at the next meeting with the premiers.¹⁶² Press coverage was much blunter. The *Sydney Morning Herald* editorialised on Page's 'disposition to obscure the substance of his proposals in a cloud of idealistic generalities'.¹⁶³ The Melbourne *Argus* reported a 'sometimes acrimonious discussion' that was a 'setback to Sir Earle Page'. It later added that one premier had been anxious to leave for Melbourne to attend a race meeting – Dunstan, no doubt.¹⁶⁴ Stevens alone wrote to Lyons promising manpower and appointing a committee to examine 'the organisation that would be set up to give effect to these proposals'.¹⁶⁵

In parliament Page found himself awkwardly trying to defend the meeting with the premiers when speaking on a no-confidence motion moved by Curtin. He was reduced to attacking 'lying stories of intrigue and motives', which 'made worse an atmosphere which was already difficult'. He denied a report that the defence minister had left the conference just to attend a dance – it was actually the Journalists' Ball that he had gone to, as had most other conference participants, he explained to the House.¹⁶⁶ Page's assertions that the premiers had been keen on his proposals sounded hollow, and did not convince Curtin.

160 *Ibid.*, pp. 4–8; Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 263.

161 *Conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers*, EPP, folder 581, p. 14.

162 'For Press', 22 October 1938, EPP, folder 583.

163 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 October 1938, p. 10.

164 *Argus*, 22 October 1938, p. 1; 24 October 1938, p. 3.

165 Stevens to Lyons, 3 November 1938, EPP, folder 395.

166 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 3 November 1938, p. 1190.

But Page was not one to give up on something he had sought for so long. An unsigned and evidently draft Cabinet memo, probably prepared by Page or at least for his use, stated a determination to appoint an expert committee 'forthwith'. It warned that 'the Commonwealth Government has determined that with the cooperation of the states, if it can get it, or without that cooperation, if it cannot, it will endeavour to make a national effort commensurate with our needs and resources'.¹⁶⁷ The incorrigible Page wrote to Giblin insisting that the timing for planned development was still 'never better'. Although he feared that the government 'seemed to be falling apart', it was 'ready to make a fresh start'.¹⁶⁸ Page also assured his departmental secretary that 'I am quite sure that now we will really get a first class chance to secure co-ordination and planned development'.¹⁶⁹ He also kept pressing Lyons, who agreed to Cabinet reconsidering the whole idea. Page complained to the prime minister that a report by the Military Board on state cooperation was 'uninspiring', making it 'obvious that the whole question of future industrial development and location of industries and their strategic value does not enter into their thoughts' – reaffirmation that defence was not Page's first priority.¹⁷⁰

Preparation for the second bout with the premiers was more thorough. On 25 October Cabinet finally approved a list of works for construction by the states.¹⁷¹ Page directed Wilson to develop a new planning proposal. Wilson suggested a central coordinating committee of officials and industrialists to be called the Council of Industrial Development and Defence. This would be headed by a chief executive officer attached to the prime minister's office and supported by specialist advisory committees. The council would recommend projects to Commonwealth and state ministers, including when they met as the Loan Council. 'Planless development', warned Wilson, is 'possibly national suicide'. Perhaps dutifully, he described this proposal as so generous that 'the Commonwealth government does not entertain the least doubt that the Premiers will find it acceptable'.¹⁷² Yet when the defence minister

167 EPP, folder 583, untitled and undated, but refers to the conference with the premiers as having been 'on Friday', p. 1.

168 Page to Giblin, 28 November 1938, EPP, folder 407.

169 Page to J.F. Murphy, 14 December 1938, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 3, folder 25.

170 Page to Lyons, 4 January 1939, EPP, folder 586.

171 Cabinet minute of 25 October 1938, NAA, A2694, VOLUME 19 PART 1, folio 71.

172 'Industrial Development and Defence', 1 November 1938, EPP, folder 1621; see also Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1939–41*, p. 130.

provided Page with a revised list of priority works, he imparted a sense of the difficulties faced by adding that Tasmania and Western Australia were reluctant to make supplies available to the Defence Department on Sundays.¹⁷³

But then Page reconsidered the implications of the October conference for his need to allay state suspicions. A committee of officials and industrialists would overwhelm the Loan Council with requests for ministerial guidance. Page and his departmental secretary now proposed that 'the developmental and public works activity of Australia should be a ministerial body' – a National Council, supported by a full-time chief industrial adviser and an advisory committee of officials and experts.¹⁷⁴ Page was increasingly impatient. In a February 1939 memorandum to Cabinet he floated the idea of appointing an (unspecified) individual 'with status and authority to get right on with the consideration of the problems', thus 'leaving the lines of co-operation with the states to be traced as opportunity offers'.¹⁷⁵

The conference with the premiers of 31 March 1939 was barely an advance on that of the previous October. It met in the shadow of Germany's invasion of Czechoslovakia on 15 March: Lyons opened proceedings with a grim warning to be ready for war. The National Council was still expected to extend well beyond defence needs to produce 'an ordered programme of national development, both primary and secondary'. Lyons tried pacifying the states by stressing the inclusion of their ministers in the council, but reiterated that because the Commonwealth faced too great a defence burden they would have to rearrange their own expenditures to cover the revised public works schedule.¹⁷⁶ Although a National Council of the prime minister and the premiers was at last endorsed, it was saddled with a debilitatingly obscure brief: 'to consider matters of concern as occasion arises and to bring about all the necessary co-ordination of

173 Geoffrey Street to Page, 3 February 1939, EPP, folder 588.

174 'Development and Defence', undated but clearly subsequent to Wilson's 'Industrial Development and Defence' proposal, EPP, folder 2121; see also Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1939–41*, pp. 131–2.

175 'Memorandum for Cabinet – Co-ordination of Development and Defence', 6 February 1939, EPP, folder 588. See also Page's memo of 28 March 1939, in which he proposed 'appointment of a special person as supremo on classification of public works', NAA, A2694, VOLUME 19 PART 2, folio 265.

176 'Speech for Prime Minister, Premiers' Conference, March 31st, 1939', EPP, folder 583; also 'Statement by the Minister for Defence', EPP, folder 592 (specific date not given).

the related activities of the Commonwealth and the states'.¹⁷⁷ A memo, evidently prepared for Cabinet so as to report in full on the meeting's outcomes, added agreement to such platitudes as 'close and continuous consultation concerning public works which are of value from the defence point of view' and to 'confer concerning ways and means of developing new industries needed for defence and supply'. The schedule of projects was consigned to discussion between Commonwealth and state officials.¹⁷⁸

Even the Commonwealth doubted its own creation. The secretary of the Department of Defence thought the National Council 'should be confined to those problems which grow out of the Defence plans in relation to the national economic structure and primary and secondary industry', otherwise it would constitute 'an obvious duplication'. The chairman of the Defence Committee, Vice Admiral Colvin, warned that 'the National Council must be divorced from all strategical considerations'. Essington Lewis simply declared the Council best left to politicians, not business.¹⁷⁹ Nor did the proposed public works progress well. The only concrete Commonwealth offer was extended in December 1938 to 'co-operate with the states in works suitable for unemployment relief on the understanding that the state concerned would meet one fifth of costs and the works would have defence or civil aviation value'. Six months later the state cooperation liaison officer in the Department of Defence reported that the only works of defence value actually undertaken were a few road construction and repair works.¹⁸⁰

In June 1939 the National Council met at the end of a premiers' conference, for the second and last time. (There had been a brief inaugural meeting just after the March premiers' conference.) Hasluck later concluded that since he could not find a record of discussions, and surviving participants were unable to recall any significant outcomes, it 'could not have had any marked consequences'.¹⁸¹ Australia's best-placed and most ambitious attempt to plan the entire nation had already faded.

177 Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1939–41*, p. 133.

178 'National Security – Co-operation with the States and Co-ordination of Commonwealth Activities', 4 April 1938, EPP, folder 589.

179 Frederick Shedden, 'The National Council – its Functions in Their Relation to Defence', 5 April 1939; Vice Admiral Colvin to Shedden, 'Functions of National Council – Minute by Chairman, Defence Committee', 6 April 1939; Essington Lewis to Shedden, 12 April 1939; all EPP, folder 588 (part 2).

180 Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1939–41*, pp. 132, 135.

181 *Ibid.*, p. 136. Press accounts of the council's inaugural meeting include the Melbourne *Argus*, 3 April 1939, p. 8, and *Age*, 3 April 1939, p. 12.

The National Council episode matches assessments by some historians that the later 1930s in Australia was a time of pessimism and a dearth of policy innovation.¹⁸² Far from economic recovery opening the way for a resurgence of developmentalism, few policy-makers saw a need for radical change. Planning served no particular sectoral interest: apart from Page, support was limited to some economists and intellectuals. The Canberra-based *Australian National Review* was one of very few publications to endorse Page's ideas: 'the development of neglected power sources is essential not only for the decentralisation of manufacturing industries but the for realisation of the industrial expansion that Australian interest demands'.¹⁸³ Page stood out as a developmentalist visionary in an unambitious government focused on austerity-led recovery, but could not spark a renewed Bruce–Page-style commitment to development. The Depression era had so deadened the Australian sense of possibilities that its main additions to the nation's political imagination were some avowedly anti-political movements.

The National Council also recalls Bruce's weary comment that one of his tasks as prime minister was to restrain the many enthusiasms of Earle Page. Page unfettered was indeed prone to sudden bold moves when he spied an opportunity, instead of the slow process of building support by demonstrating how his ideas could actually work. Even as he rode high politically in the late 1930s, defence concerns and support from figures of the standing of Giblin and Wilson gave Page a starting point only. He had few close political confidants and did not habitually work with his political colleagues as policy equals. As the sense of economic urgency faded, Page's appeals to idealism attracted only already committed developmentalist thinkers like Stevens and Casey. It may be significant that Casey had originally trained as an engineer and had worked in mining and manufacturing, unusual for a politician then or now. Nor was the federal system as malleable as Page had hoped: state mistrust of the Commonwealth, and of Page himself, was strong.

The overall implication is that Page's power, although deep, was narrow. It encompassed only a federal Cabinet in which he headed the junior coalition party under a prime minister so weakened that he complied with a proposal he appears not to have fully understood. Page was much stronger in Lyons's Cabinet than in the business world. It also highlights

182 Such as Robertson, '1930–39', in Crowley, *A New History of Australia*, pp. 434–5, 448.

183 *Australian National Review*, April 1939, pp. 2–4.

how he had drifted from his own Country Party: few party colleagues supported his National Council and some, notably Dunstan, were openly hostile.

The end result was that Page overstretched himself badly. A telling indicator of his self-perception as a rationalist, not the emotive dreamer he really was, is that he rarely thought through the practical implementation of ideas such as planning. Planning was to Page self-evidently logical and thus assuredly workable. He was ultimately defeated by the difficulty of embedding comprehensive planning in a federal system, by sceptical political colleagues and by the indifference of private industry. Yet Page never forgot his 1938–39 planning proposal. As early as December 1940, in a speech on the war effort, he again called for 'a National Council of all the governments of Australia' that used 'the best brains of the community with all the necessary powers to deal with both defence and developmental problems'.¹⁸⁴ National economic planning is an important part of Page's vision, but did not give rise to a lasting personal legacy.

Page's political crisis and fall

As a major failure in full view of his political peers, the rapid demise of the National Council almost certainly contributed to a decline in Page's political standing. He remained a formidable advocate, well capable in the years that followed of pushing his ideas into national political debate, including those on planning. But from 1939 onwards, Page was never again entrusted with a major leadership role in development policy. Political colleagues had lost faith in his grand visions.

Page's loss of the Country Party leadership in September 1939 is usually attributed to the events of his caretaker prime ministership five months earlier, primarily his infamous attempt to block the ascension of Robert Menzies. But Page's hold on the leadership had been slowly weakening for several years. Press reports appeared as early as 1932 of Country Party MPs being open to a change of leadership in favour of Thomas Paterson so as to clear the way for the formation of a coalition with the UAP. Reportedly, Page was saved by the unacceptability of the terms that Lyons offered.¹⁸⁵ John McEwen later said that when he entered federal parliament in 1934

184 Untitled speech, 16 December 1940, EPP, folder 591.

185 See George Paterson, *The Life and Times of Thomas Paterson (1882–1952): A Biography and History by His Elder Son George Paterson*, privately published, Caulfield East, Vic., 1987, p. 42.

‘Page had already lost the support of a good section – not the majority, but a pretty important section – of his party’. For all Page’s industry and imagination, he ‘was determined to do what he wanted to do’ and ‘did not, except in a most passing way, consult his party members’.¹⁸⁶

Others have attested to a personal antipathy between Page and McEwen. Page had in 1934 campaigned against McEwen in the federal seat of Echuca amid a bitter resurgence of the long-standing dispute between the Victorian Country Party and its federal counterpart over participation in coalition governments. The state party’s central council had decreed that all candidates, whether state or federal, should sign a pledge that included refusal to support a coalition without the approval of the Victorian party organisation. Five sitting Victorian federal members including Paterson refused to sign, and W.C. Hill resigned from his seat of Echuca. At the ensuing 1934 national election the new candidate for Echuca endorsed by the Victorian organisation was none other than McEwen. Page directly entered the Echuca campaign in favour of two independent Country Party candidates backed by the federal parliamentary party.

McEwen won but, upon taking his seat, sided with the federal party and urged his Victorian colleagues to repair the breach. In 1937 McEwen blamed Page for blocking his elevation to the deputy leadership of the parliamentary party. Their mutual hostility also had much to do with very different respective backgrounds and policy priorities. Ian Robinson, much later Country Party MP for Cowper and the eponymous seat of Page, and who admired Page as ‘an incredible man’, said that this mutual disdain was ‘so great that I don’t think it could ever be properly or fully described’.¹⁸⁷ This is an overstatement – Robinson himself added that such antipathy did not harm the Country Party, so evidently they were still able to reluctantly work together.

In the wake of Lyons’s death on 7 April 1939, the parliamentary Country Party passed a resolution that it was not prepared to remain in a coalition should Menzies accede to the prime ministership, largely due to Menzies’s position that he would choose all ministers from both coalition parties himself. As Page himself told parliament, the decision by the governor-general, Lord Gowrie, to swear him in as caretaker prime minister pending the UAP’s selection of a successor to Lyons was based on two special

186 John McEwen, *John McEwen: His Story*, edited by R.V. Jackson, privately published, place of publication n.a., 1983, p. 11.

187 See Davey, *Ninety Not Out*, pp. 19, 55, 61.

considerations. One was the lack of a direct line of succession within the UAP following Menzies's resignation as deputy leader the previous month. The other was that Lyons had died without having nominated a successor: the governor-general had even confirmed with two of the doctors attending the stricken prime minister that there was no possibility of his doing so.

Page had late the previous year persuaded Menzies not to leave the Cabinet; he condemned his resignation in March 1939 as especially 'unthinkable' by coming just as Hitler was about to invade Czechoslovakia and war seemed increasingly likely.¹⁸⁸ Menzies was provoked by the effective shelving of a national insurance scheme, supported by the Country Party on cost and other grounds but seen by him as exemplifying the government's wider decline. Page later wrote that the proposed scheme as originally recommended by British advisers brought out to Australia was simply too big and complex. It was 'a child of such size that only a Caesarean section would permit its parliamentary delivery, and both the offspring and mother might be killed in the process'. Page added that 'my predications proved exact' when the legislation was gradually emasculated by amendments.¹⁸⁹ Much of this arose from opposition within government ranks that included demands by dissident Country Party MPs for the inclusion of small farmers in the scheme. The scheme also ran increasingly foul of varying degrees of ambivalence and outright opposition from the medical profession, trade unions, state governments and employers, especially those in the pastoral industry concerned by the complexities and costs of including seasonal workers.¹⁹⁰ This resulted in the excision of much of the scheme's social welfare provisions and a narrowing of its focus down onto medical benefits, leading to Menzies's declaration that he could no longer meet promises that he had made in good faith to his electors.

Prime Minister Page took a predictably expansive approach to his caretaker status. He confirmed with his Cabinet senior appointments to the taxation office and the referral of cable manufacture to the Tariff Board. But Page does not appear to have made any concerted effort to extend his brief prime ministership. This was despite reported encouragement from Opposition leader Curtin, who Page claimed had, at Lyons's funeral at Devonport, offered to support his continuation in office until the next

188 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 266.

189 *Ibid.*, pp. 266–7.

190 Gillespie, *The Price of Health*, pp. 109–10.

federal election, due in 18 months. Page turned this unexpected offer down as he was not comfortable leading a government that lacked its own parliamentary majority.¹⁹¹ Curtin was undoubtedly influenced by a similar arrangement between the ALP and the Country Party in Victoria that maintained Dunstan as premier.

Page was in fact determined to entice Stanley Bruce back from London to resume the prime ministership. He wrote in his memoirs that he returned from London in 1938 not only wanting a national planning agency, but also with a conviction that the likelihood of war raised the need for a national government formed from all the political parties represented in parliament. Bruce, unlike Menzies as Page saw him, had the necessary experience and stature to be ‘the ideal figure to fulfil this exacting role’, not least as he had been ‘removed from the bickerings and disputes of the Australian parliamentary scene’.¹⁹² Page even offered up to Bruce his own seat of Cowper as a base. *Truant Surgeon* provides the text of an exchange by cable with Bruce and transcripts of international phone calls that Page and Casey made to him soon after, Bruce then being in the United States on his way back to London. Bruce effectively refused by stipulating that he would only serve as prime minister without belonging to any political party and with the support of all the parties. Page took this to mean at the head of an all-party national government. Bruce’s reluctance is another sign that he was not as close to Page as Page himself thought. He even added that he was prepared to come back not necessarily as prime minister but rather as ‘a leader’ who could ‘give any help to Australia in the political arena’: the qualification remained that this would not be as a member of any party.¹⁹³ Curtin and the Labor Party opposed a national government on the grounds that the only thing worse than a government of two parties was one of three.

The parliamentary Country Party on 18 April formally resolved not to serve under Menzies and to support the return of Bruce to lead a national government. Many UAP MPs also doubted Menzies’s suitability to lead the party. His main rival for the prime ministership was the otherwise unlikely figure of the 76-year-old Hughes. There was also a suggestion from within the Country Party that the new prime minister be chosen

191 *Ibid.*, p. 270.

192 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, pp. 270–1. The fullest description of the course of events following the death of Lyons is provided by Paul Davey in the chapter on Prime Minister Page in his *The Country Party Prime Ministers: Their Trials and Tribulations*, privately published, Chatswood, NSW, 2011.

193 Davey, *The Country Party Prime Ministers*, p. 273.

from the UAP's ranks by a joint meeting of the two governing parties, which would almost certainly not have anointed Menzies.¹⁹⁴ When the UAP party room met on 18 April, Menzies failed to secure a majority on the first vote running against Hughes, Casey and White. He defeated Hughes on the third ballot by just four votes. Bruce soon after told Menzies that Page had inadvertently been 'your fairy god-father' by elevating him to 'a sitting certainty' in the UAP ballot.¹⁹⁵ The Country Party's vow that it would not serve under Menzies was blunted by it also not threatening to bring a Menzies government down.

More personally, the seasoned journalist Roy Curthoys privately commented that he had heard Menzies speak of Page with such contempt that he 'gasped', and that these comments had gotten back to Page.¹⁹⁶ The two were very different in background and personality. Menzies is said to have acquired a distaste for the Country Party during his years in Victorian state politics. But Page particularly disdained Menzies for the pressure he placed on the ailing Lyons by his recent resignation from the ministry and deputy leadership. Enid Lyons reportedly attested to Page's anger being related to this perception.¹⁹⁷ Frank Green recalled Lyons immediately before his fatal heart attack ruefully reflecting that 'I should never have left Tasmania; I had good mates there, and was happy, but this situation is killing me'.¹⁹⁸ When Lyons lay dying in St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney the press gallery correspondent Harold Cox witnessed Page in the hospital reception room amid parliamentarians and journalists openly 'tracing the course of Lyons's heart condition as a doctor and linking its development to the attacks which he alleged Menzies had made on Lyons'.¹⁹⁹ Broadcasting news of Lyons's death to the nation, Page more obliquely implicated Menzies by attributing the premature demise of 'our beloved Prime Minister' to 'the intense strain and anxiety which accompanied his efforts to help Australia and the British Empire in their pressing hour of extremity'.²⁰⁰

194 *Argus*, 19 April 1939, p. 1.

195 Cameron Hazlehurst, *Menzies Observed*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1979, p. 166. Some sources say Menzies won by five or six votes.

196 Letter from Curthoys to James Darling, 24 April 1939, quoted in A.W. Martin, *Robert Menzies: A Life, Volume 2, 1944-1978*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 1999, pp. 277-8.

197 Cameron Hazlehurst, 'Young Menzies', in Hazlehurst (ed.), *Australian Conservatism: Essays in Australian Conservatism*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1979, pp. 11, 25.

198 Green, *Servant of the House*, p. 116.

199 Harold Cox interview, quoted in Cameron Hazlehurst, *Ten Journeys to Cameron's Farm: An Australian Tragedy*, ANU Press, Canberra, 2013, pp. 8-9.

200 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 April 1939, p. 15.

Privately, Page had written to his wife in November 1938 that ‘Lyons has been very badly attacked by Menzies – but has survived with my aid’ and of the ‘bullets hitting the wrong victims and the P.M. emerging stronger than he was’.²⁰¹ Page pictured himself as holding the Cabinet together: the following month he reported that although Cabinet had been ‘crumbling’ he had inserted ‘some cement joined in with the mortar ... which I think will hold for some considerable time’.²⁰² Just eight days into his short prime ministership, Page wrote also to Drummond in wistful terms that hint at the stress he was feeling and of his most fundamental hopes. He wanted to write a book on ‘the aspirations, ideals, philosophy and history of our work for those who come after us to have a touchstone for their job’. He would like to ‘try and get a decent library together at Grafton and make it a Mecca for keen enthusiasts to come along and have a talk with me’.²⁰³

Was the failure of the National Council a further factor in Page’s surge of hostility to Menzies? Almost certainly it was, adding policy substance to the personal gulf that lay between the two men. Page was conscious of the lack of support for this initiative from his federal colleagues. In *Truant Surgeon* he portrayed Menzies as petulantly throwing his pencil down and refusing to write another word of the prime minister’s opening speech for the first conference with the premiers once he heard that Lyons was to be flown in to deliver it himself, the implication being that this was why the speech was not ready in time. Page added that during the subsequent proceedings Menzies ‘adopted an aloof attitude’.²⁰⁴

Conversely, witnessing Page assume effective leadership of the government may well have been the last straw for Menzies’s confidence in Lyons. Menzies’s own notorious speech of the time was made to the Constitutional Club in Sydney on 24 October 1938, just three days after the premiers’ conference. Page and Enid Lyons were among those who interpreted his comments on national leadership as a public attack on the prime minister.²⁰⁵ Menzies consistently denied this, but Page responded

201 Earle Page to Ethel Page, 9 November and 10 November 1938, EPP, folder 2787 (part 3).

202 Earle Page to L.R. MacGregor, Australian Trade Commissioner New York, 14 December 1938, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 4, folder 25.

203 Page to Drummond, 15 April 1939, EPP, folder 2706.

204 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, pp. 263–4.

205 The fullest account of this speech is at Martin, *Robert Menzies: A Life, Volume 1*, pp. 241–4. This touches on the context of the speech being preceded by an unhappy meeting with the premiers, but does not draw out Page’s role in this.

by delivering a radio broadcast a week later defending Lyons. 'Personality plus plan make up the essential qualities of leadership', he said. Having a plan was so essential that this explained the longevity of the Bruce–Page and Lyons governments.²⁰⁶

Public and parliamentary condemnation of Page's atypically personal attack was a critical step towards his eventual loss of the party leadership. Two Country Party MPs, including Arthur Fadden, at once sat as independent Country Party members; two others followed when parliament next met on 3 May. Fadden had endured his own personal attacks for not enlisting in the First AIF.²⁰⁷ By contrast, the eight UAP ministers who had served under Lyons almost immediately produced for the incoming prime minister a jointly signed letter dissociating themselves from Page's comments.²⁰⁸

Most accounts of the fall of Earle Page imply that his attack on Menzies resulted in rapid banishment into the political outer. Page in fact survived as party leader for another five months. The Country Party stayed firm as a whole in its refusal to re-establish the coalition on Menzies's terms. Although Page's standing in the Country Party was seriously weakened, he was partially insulated by the absence of the four dissenters from the party room. There was also some muddying of waters from the intertwining of party refusal to serve under Menzies on political grounds with Page's more personal hostility.

Just four days after assailing Menzies, Page survived his first internal party test at a meeting of the central council of the New South Wales party. The state council supported rejection of a coalition under Menzies, but Page still faced internal criticism of his remarks; he dealt with them by issuing an unconvincing statement that they should not be interpreted as having 'cast a reflection on all non-returned soldier members of the various parties'.²⁰⁹ But by July the state central council was warning Page to cease his continuing attacks on Menzies.

206 Adelaide *Advertiser*, 1 November 1938, p. 23.

207 Tracey Arklay, *Arthur Fadden: A Political Silhouette*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, North Melbourne, 2014, p. 43. Accounts of Page taking Thorby, Paterson and Cameron into his confidence about the nature of his forthcoming attack on Menzies are in Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, pp. 240–1 and Paterson, *The Life and Times of Thomas Paterson*, pp. 55–6.

208 Hazlehurst, *Ten Journeys to Cameron's Farm*, pp. 11–12.

209 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 April 1939, p. 7.

Page eventually resigned his compromised party leadership on 13 September 1939. This finally happened after a plan to vote out the Menzies Government over calls for a guaranteed price for wheat was suddenly overtaken by the outbreak of war. Page offered his support to what was now a wartime government, to which Menzies responded that he was open to having Country Party ministers in his Cabinet. Importantly, he added that while he still insisted on making the ultimate choice of all ministers, in doing so he would discuss names with the leader of the Country Party, and made clear that Page himself remained unacceptable in his Cabinet. Page publicly conceded that as party leader he was an impediment to a national government and that he should clear the way for at least a Country Party–UAP coalition.

At a long and difficult meeting on 13 September the parliamentary Country Party elected the South Australian Archie Cameron – ‘a queer mixture of generosity, prejudice and irresponsibility’ – as its new leader.²¹⁰ Cameron defeated McEwen with Page’s support, and was decisively helped by the absence of the four dissidents. The coalition was finally re-established six months later after the UAP Government had been shaken by an unexpected by-election loss. In late October 1940, following the loss of three ministers in the Canberra air crash of 13 August and only narrowly surviving the September election, Menzies in an evident effort to strengthen his weakened Cabinet brought Page back as minister for commerce. Page now professed to have become a Menzies admirer after having witnessed his performance as a wartime leader. He even defended him from personal attacks following his return from a four-month overseas trip in May 1941 and ‘as a doctor’ advised the prime minister to rest – which, as he later pointedly noted, Menzies failed to do.²¹¹ Menzies never fully forgave Page and singled him out in his memoirs for what he still well recalled as ‘a bitter and entirely false attack upon me’.²¹²

It is significant that Page failed to produce a fully like-minded successor as party leader to take up his policy vision. The temperamental Cameron sorely tested the patience of his party peers and resigned the leadership in October 1940. Page was far from being an outcast in the party, for the leadership ballot that followed resulted in a deadlock between himself and McEwen. This was only resolved by the leadership instead going to

210 Green, *Servant of the House*, p. 137.

211 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 296.

212 R.G. Menzies, *Afternoon Light: Some Memories of Men and Events*, Cassell, Melbourne, 1967, p. 13.

Fadden as a compromise candidate, now back in the Country Party fold. This supposedly stopgap measure in fact frustrated McEwen's leadership ambitions until Fadden's retirement in 1958. Fadden was a less divisive party leader than Page. Paul Hasluck, in his capacity as both historian and colleague, recalled him as an 'affable, astute, story-telling man, untroubled by the deeper significance of problems'.²¹³ He was far more malleable on policy than Page. During the war years and in the post-war lead-up to the second Menzies Government, he was readily drawn to conventional policies on rural development. This helped consolidate the shift of the Country Party away from Page's vision of the nation.

Page could look back on the 1930s as his most mixed decade. His political fortunes fell, rose and then suddenly fell again at decade's end. Despite the closeness of their working relationship, Lyons had not provided the balance of opportunity and firm guidance that Bruce had. His priority of recovery from the Depression offered Page only limited basis for policy initiatives until he asserted himself on planning in 1938–39. Undeterred, Page adapted only his strategies to the greatly changed environment of the Depression, not his fundamental aims. Pragmatic opportunism became increasingly unavoidable as he had to be alert to limited opportunities. Page's own use of experts such as Wilson and Giblin late in the decade unwittingly marked a step towards the consolidation of the role of economists in government.

Yet Page still made major contributions to Australian political ideas in these years. He was the main bridge for developmentalist ideas into politics as he tried to harness such energetic business leaders as Gepp and Lewis, and established relationships with a select number of more abstract thinkers such as Bland. By seizing upon a succession of infrequent chances to implement dearly held ideas that now sat well outside the policy mainstream, he managed to promote most major elements of the vision he set out in 1917, albeit with very differing results. Although Page played leading roles in placing regionalism and planning on the political agenda, his most substantive achievement of the 1930s was the Australian Agricultural Council, a lasting landmark in cooperative federalism.

213 Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1939–41*, p. 266.

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