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PAGE INDEFATIGABLE

His Last Years in Public Life

When Page was appointed minister for health in the second Menzies Government, he saw himself as also becoming its leading advocate of developmentalism. In practice, he struggled to exert influence in a political environment that continued to evolve in ways he found uncongenial. Signs of the difficulties he would face were evident well before the government's election in December 1949. The alliance between the Country Party and the new Liberal Party was unlike coalitions Page had previously experienced, and a highly charged political contest between public sector-led development and private enterprise left less space for his brand of ambitious developmentalism.

Relations between the two conservative parties had reached a low point during the 1943 federal election campaign when Menzies, then a prominent backbencher, disowned part of the joint Opposition policy speech delivered by Fadden as Opposition leader. But the following year, after resuming the leadership of the UAP, Menzies invited the Country Party to attend the talks that led to the formation of the Liberal Party, raising the possibility of merger. Richard Casey as president of the Liberal Party over 1947–49 had doubts about amalgamation. The issue was further complicated by proposals of varying degrees of goodwill put forth at the state level, especially in New South Wales.¹ A merger did not eventuate, but collaboration between the two parties grew as each saw the other as an increasingly likely coalition partner.

¹ Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 275; Ian Hancock, *National and Permanent?: The Federal Organisation of the Liberal Party of Australia 1944–1965*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, Vic., 2000, pp. 76–80.

Page intervened early and strongly when the Country Party resumed its internal debate on coalition, a clear sign that he aspired to again play a major role in government. As Australian Country Party Association chair he assured his Liberal counterpart, T.M. Ritchie, in January 1946 that the Country Party would collaborate in 'securing the maximum goodwill between the parties', especially by managing how they contested seats.² The parties cooperated informally at the September 1946 federal election but their respective leaders still delivered separate policy speeches, with the result that Fadden was seen to be outbidding the Liberals on tax cuts. Resumption of a coalition became an even higher priority after the unexpectedly severe loss at this election, leading the two parties to form a joint Opposition executive to guide policy and tactics.

Page had temporary success during this immediate post-war period in injecting ideas into the federal Country Party's policy commitments. Fadden's 1946 policy speech included some ambitious developmentalist concepts that Page had long advocated – a national development and defence council, set prices for primary products, a flat national electricity rate and an invitation to the chair of the TVA to visit to advise on the Clarence, the Snowy, the Murray Valley and even the Bradfield Plan to irrigate the continent's interior.³ These promises were made from the freedom of Opposition: their expansiveness is suggestive of a rhetorical riposte to the Chifley Government's avowed nation-building agenda.

Nor did they last. By 1948 Page felt compelled to produce his own press release on 'The Need of a Strong, Vigorous and Numerous Country Party' in an attempt to reaffirm the party's commitment to decentralisation.⁴ Country Party–Liberal relations continued to improve over 1948–49, despite lingering discord at state level over competition for Lower House seats.⁵ At a January 1949 meeting to plan for the forthcoming election, the federal Country Party proposed an electoral pact with the Liberals and offered to confer on policy.⁶ Page was heartened by the likely revival of a coalition but also faced a continuing shift in public opinion against government-led planning, not a good sign for this inveterate planner.

2 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 266.

3 The text of this speech of 3 September 1946 is at EPP, folder 2618. The TVA chair, David Lilienthal, appears not to have visited Australia.

4 'The Need of a Strong, Vigorous and Numerous Country Party', EPP, folder 1994 (part 1). Undated, but data used suggests 1948 or 1949.

5 Hancock, *National and Permanent?*, pp. 101–5.

6 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 271.

The public increasingly wanted to be rid of irksome wartime controls and the Cold War context added unsavoury connotations to government intervention. ‘The word “plan” was a dirty word then’, recalled political journalist Frank Chamberlain.⁷ The May 1948 referendum on Commonwealth control of rents and prices, conducted in the shadow of the Chifley Government’s attempts to nationalise the private banks, was heavily defeated. Debate on the role of the state helped give the new Liberal Party a strong platform based on a commitment to individualism and private enterprise, but tempered by its qualified acceptance of a place for government in economic management and social welfare. The federal Country Party broadly agreed: at the January 1949 meeting with the Liberals it declared that ‘to defeat communism, to preserve freedom in Australia and the driving force of individual initiative, it is most important to remove the Chifley socialistic government from power’.⁸

Improving relations between the Liberals and the Country Party imposed disciplines that left less space for Page’s vision. For the December 1949 election, Menzies and Fadden affirmed a renewed coalition by delivering a combined Opposition policy speech. Their ‘joint policy’ proposed banning the Communist Party, combating industrial unrest, a national health scheme, stabilisation programs for the wheat and dairy industries, and the raising of loans to be managed by what became the Department of National Development.⁹ In his own campaign speeches Fadden now gave priority to conventional causes of country roads, stabilisation of rural industries and an end to rationing – not planning or overtures to the TVA. He was especially vocal on petrol rationing, which the government had reintroduced to help conserve the sterling bloc’s pool of US dollars – ‘empty out the Chifley socialists and fill the bowsters’.¹⁰

Page did not play a major national role in the 1949 campaign. His main contributions were attacks on the Chifley Government’s plans for comprehensive medical and pharmaceutical benefits schemes. A High Court decision striking down compulsory clauses in its legislation on pharmaceutical benefits opened the way, said Page, for a ‘sane approach’ based on the willing cooperation of health service providers.¹¹ Chifley

7 Frank Chamberlain, interview by Mel Pratt, 4 August 1972 and 19 January 1973, Mel Pratt Collection, NLA, TRC 121/39, FC:1:2/3.

8 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 271.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 271–2.

10 Macintyre, *Australia’s Boldest Experiment*, p. 435; quote from Arklay, *Arthur Fadden*, p. 136.

11 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 October 1949, p. 1.

attributed his unexpectedly severe loss in the election – the ALP won just 47 seats in an enlarged 121-member House of Representatives – to public resentment of petrol rationing and bank nationalisation. Page's primary vote in Cowper reached its post-war peak of nearly 62 per cent.

The eternally optimistic Page welcomed the demise of the Chifley Government not merely as a party political triumph. After the baffling frustrations of post-war reconstruction under Chifley, Dedman and Coombs, he was again a Commonwealth minister in a government with a stated commitment to developmentalism. One of its first significant acts was to create a new portfolio of National Development, with Page's old friend Casey as minister. He even saw the election as offering hope at last for The Gorge project.¹² In practice, Page was only a nominal insider in the new government and over the next six years failed to spark a resurgence of his style of developmentalism. The government did engage with issues dear to Page, notably planning, power generation and higher education. But his nation-changing goals of decentralisation, regionalism and hydroelectricity diverged too far from the government's more immediate objectives for him to greatly influence its policy mainstream.

The 1949 election was also challenging for Page by marking a major generational change in parliamentary membership. It is widely appreciated that this was so for the Liberal Party, with the average age of its 38 first-timers in the House of Representatives (out of a total of 55 Liberal MPs) being a comparatively youthful 43. Most were imbued with a sense of having been elected at a pivotal time to oppose socialism. Less widely known is that there was also an influx of new Country Party MPs. Of the party's 19 members in the House, eight were entirely new to parliament.¹³ Page, approaching 70 years of age when the election was held, was the only survivor from the Bruce–Page days; no doubt he took solace from David Drummond's transfer from the New South Wales Parliament to become the new federal member for New England. Page's views on Australian development were to diverge more than ever from all but a few of his party colleagues.

12 See for example his articles in the *Daily Examiner* of 29 October 1949, p. 9.

13 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, pp. 281–2.

Page returns to government: Triumph in the health portfolio but planning falters

Robert Menzies did not incur lasting damage from Page's 1939 attack. His return to government 10 years later was at the head of a revitalised new party with a clearer philosophy and stronger national organisation than its UAP predecessor. Menzies accepted an important role for government in both economy and society, provided this 'seemed to us to be the best answer to a practical problem'. The new prime minister upheld the Snowy Scheme, social welfare, increased public funding of universities and the policy-advising role of the public service. But this was within a wider context in which, as he reflected towards the end of his reign, his government's 'first impulse' was 'always to seek the private enterprise answer, to help the individual to help himself, to create a climate, economic, social, industrial, favourable to his activity and growth'.¹⁴

Helping consolidate this was a significant intellectual and governmental shift during the early 1950s from the social-democratic Keynesianism of the Chifley era to a more technocratic Keynesianism. Under the latter, 'maintaining continuous economic growth became the new goal of economic management, which was redefined as a matter for bureaucratic administration based on economic "science" rather than political contest'. Unexpectedly strong private sector demand had stabilised the economy at full employment, and so 'the idea of planning, of setting social goals and directing the economy accordingly, had given way to the lesser aims of management'.¹⁵ John Crawford, now secretary of the Commonwealth Department of Commerce and Agriculture, encapsulated this major shift in a 1952 public lecture on agricultural policy. Crawford, who also chaired the Standing Committee of the Australian Agricultural Council and had the increasingly influential John McEwen as his minister, began by explaining that he would 'not be concerned to examine in any detail the relation between agricultural policy objectives and programmes and wider objectives of economic and social policy for the economy as a whole'. Instead, 'the 1952 policy is really one which makes enhanced agricultural production a matter of urgency because it is a principal means to the

¹⁴ Menzies speaking to the Liberal Party Federal Council, 6 April 1964, quoted in Walter, *What Were They Thinking?*, p. 207.

¹⁵ Paul Smyth, *Australian Social Policy: The Keynesian Chapter*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1994, pp. 4, 127.

wider ends of national interest'.¹⁶ Page found during this decade that such narrowing of perspective worked against preparedness to indulge his developmentalist vision of the nation.

The political dominance of Menzies from 1949 was alone sufficient to constrict Page's influence beyond his portfolio. Menzies's markedly improved relations with the Country Party did not fully encompass his new minister for health. Page was not, for example, part of a March 1952 meeting of senior ministers with the visiting president of the World Bank, Eugene Black, despite discussion of matters as vital to him as water and electrification.¹⁷ His fraught relationships with Menzies and Fadden were not aided by a practice of peppering both with missives proposing new initiatives, only some of which concerned health policy. Menzies typically responded with icy formality.¹⁸ Page had mentored the young Fadden in the 1930s, but did not remain close to him personally or politically.

Fadden, habitually a hearty friend to all, as Treasurer took little interest in Page's vision and schemes. He referred some of Page's correspondence to his departmental secretary Roland Wilson, who was dismissive of Page's hope of attracting private investment to infrastructure projects. Page's model for this involved granting a private corporation a franchise or charter to construct a dam at its own expense, after which it would reap revenues for a set period before the facility would 'become the property of the Authority giving the charter, debt free and fully functioning'.¹⁹ Page's public pronouncements on this elicited a livid telegram from Fadden in August 1956 – it was strictly a matter for the states, said the treasurer.²⁰ Page was not deterred. Nor would relations have been improved by a *Daily Telegraph* editorial of the following year contrasting the 'elder statesman' Page with 'sit-on-your-hands' Fadden.²¹ Page was trying to operate in political circumstances that relied more on cautious but assertive public

16 Crawford, *Australian Agricultural Policy*, p. 8.

17 See record of meeting of 12 March 1952, EPP, folder 2508.

18 Such as a 1951 letter from Menzies to Page rejecting a proposal to implement the new medical benefits scheme at once as 'half-cocked'; see EPP, folder 2366.

19 See for example Page to Fadden and Menzies, 3 November 1955, EPP, folder 1750 (part 1); on Page's private investment ideas, see 'Local Government Enquiry Commencing at Grafton on 10 September 1956, on Proposed Redivision of Local Government Boundaries – Evidence of Sir Earle Page, MP', EPP, folder 1798.

20 Fadden to Page, telegram, 1 August 1956, EPP, folder 2049.

21 *Daily Telegraph*, 31 July 1956.

service advisers than the rural activists and visionary industrialists with whom he empathised. Unintentionally, he became a contrarian in the government.

Economic policy in the 1950s had only a coincidental focus on elements of Page's agenda. Page nominally conformed to most precepts of the Menzies Government, and drew on these opportunistically to provide new arguments for old ideas. He used the language of the Cold War warrior in linking the 'the growing, sinister and secret influence of Communism' to the growth of cities.²² Economic policy early in these Menzies years was dominated by short-term goals, first by carrying out the promise to scale back government regulation and then by managing the inflation associated with the Korean War wool boom via the 'Horror Budget' of 1951–52. A 1953 Cabinet submission on Queensland proposals to develop the Burdekin River and Tully Falls showed no trace of Page's electrophilia; it recommended Commonwealth support for their irrigation components but declared their hydroelectric elements uneconomic.²³

Ellis's summary of what most exercised the wider Country Party in these years emphasises such issues as the appreciation of the pound, fiscal policy, responses to the wool boom, and tax averaging for primary producers prone to fluctuating incomes.²⁴ State governments gave priority to managing the pressures that urban growth imposed on education, transport and other services. Page's determination to improve rural living standards did not extend to applauding the consumerism that had burst forth from the pent-up demand of the war years, manifested in new household products and climbing rates of car and home ownership. Generally stable economic growth of over 4 per cent per annum during the 1950s made developmentalism, Page-style, seem less urgent. Menzies's chapter on development policy in his second volume of memoirs, prosaically entitled 'Stability, Capital and Development', limits itself to the wool boom, overseas investment and new mining ventures in the continent's far north-west.²⁵

22 'The Need of a Strong, Vigorous and Numerous Country Party', EPP, folder 1994 (part 1).

23 See EPP, folder 2509.

24 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, pp. 285–91.

25 Robert Menzies, *The Measure of the Years*, Cassell, London, 1970, pp. 98–108.



Figure 12: The new Menzies Ministry 1949.

Earle Page as minister for health is standing immediately behind Governor-General William McKell, former premier of New South Wales and TVA sceptic. Richard Casey is standing third from left, Enid Lyons sixth from left and John McEwen second from the right. Arthur Fadden is seated in the front row to the immediate right of McKell.

Source: Courtesy of National Archives of Australia (NAA, M4297, 10).

Page in this second Menzies Government is today best known for his role as health minister in creating Australia's first national public health benefits scheme. His return to this portfolio, which he previously held in 1937–38, elicited little public surprise: the *Sydney Morning Herald* editorialised that his 'personal claims to the portfolio can hardly be contested'.²⁶ The offer of Health to Page suggests that Menzies judged that his personal standing in the medical fraternity and tenacity in negotiation would be valuable in developing a scheme acceptable to the British Medical Association (Australia) (BMA), the profession's peak body. When Page assumed the Health portfolio, the public funding of medical services already had a long history as an unresolved issue. It had, for example, been unsuccessfully brought to the attention of two royal commissions during the Bruce–Page Government, that of 1925–27 on National Insurance and the 1925–26 Royal Commission on Health.

²⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 December 1949, p. 2.

Over 1944–49, the Curtin and Chifley governments pursued a comprehensive non-contributory scheme inspired by Britain's National Health Service that would have imposed a high degree of public control over health services. Efforts to negotiate an agreement with the BMA foundered over doctors' insistence on freedom to set their own fees. Menzies gave Page, himself a BMA member with a long personal history of resisting salaried medicine, a free hand in negotiations. Political contemporaries soon found that the new health minister was still a capable political operator. Paul Hasluck, a fellow minister, recalled him as a 'benign and shrewd old fox'.²⁷ Page seized the opportunity with typical alacrity in what Ellis, who Page engaged to publicise the proposed new scheme, later wrote of admiringly as 'a series of *coups d'état*'.²⁸

According to Ellis, other ministers 'frankly confessed their inability to grasp the gist of Page's initial explanations', Treasury officials 'were puzzled and hostile by turn', and the Health Department 'saw obstacles as high as the Himalayas where Page saw only pimples'.²⁹ On his very first day as minister, Page sent telegraphed overtures to the BMA, the Pharmaceutical Guild and the friendly societies, calling them to a national conference the next month. He produced a Cabinet submission as early as 9 January 1950 proposing a program that would 'help those who helped themselves', 'strengthen the working of existing, voluntary insurance organisations' and 'provide a real nursery for democracy'.³⁰ The long gestation that followed was considerably more discordant and full of compromise than Page's account in his memoirs suggests.

The immediate political problem Page faced was that the government did not control the Senate, posing a potential barrier to new legislation. He at first tried to work around this by instead enacting much of his scheme through regulations that took their authority from the Chifley Government's own legislation. This changed only when the government won control of the Senate in the 1951 double dissolution, leading to the *National Health Act 1953*, the main item of legislation implementing the Page Scheme, as it became known. Page also had to reach a series of acceptable compromises with the BMA and the states. The BMA was sensitive to any perceived government control of its members. It strongly

27 Paul Hasluck, *The Chance of Politics*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1997, p. 41.

28 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 292.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 292.

30 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 375.

opposed suggestions of a contract-based capitation system under which fixed amounts of money per patient per unit of time would be paid by the Commonwealth in advance to practitioners, reflected in the long-standing tension between the BMA and friendly societies that used contracts.

The BMA was not pacified into ready compliance by Page's medical credentials and so the final form of his national health scheme diverged greatly from what he put to Cabinet early in 1950.³¹ Page eventually settled on a BMA-supported model centred on the public subsidisation of fee-for-service-based private medical benefits. This was far less universalist than what Labor had sought, with access to benefits means tested and regulation largely left with the provider groups. Influential as the BMA was, the Page Scheme still owed much to his convictions about the proper role of government and the independence and privileges of the medical profession. He from the start envisaged a scheme 'based on a combination of government aid with nation-wide voluntary insurance against sickness and disease' that would not interfere in the 'personal relationship between doctor and patient', and give patients 'a definite sense of personal and social responsibility'. Page also sought to leave 'as much of the administration and control of the scheme as is possible' with doctors, chemists, hospitals and insurers. 'Subsidised voluntary health insurance' provided 'as far as possible through the machinery and administration of voluntary organisations which provide for prepaid health insurance' would avoid government nationalisation and (Page initially thought) enable quick implementation.³²

The sequential introduction of the Page Scheme started in 1950 with the free provision of specified costly life-saving and disease-preventing drugs, policed by the medical and pharmaceutical professions themselves. Page had the necessary regulations issued when parliament was in recess, reasoning that when it resumed the public would have become so accustomed to these new arrangements that Labor would be reluctant to use its Senate majority to disallow them – reminiscent of previous instances when he argued that acclimatisation would ensure public acceptance of an important Page initiative. In his anxiety to get a scheme up and running,

31 Gillespie, *The Price of Health*, pp. 254–5.

32 Earle Page, 'A New Conception of a National Health Scheme for Australia', speech to the British Commonwealth Medical Congress, Brisbane, 23 May 1950, EPP, folder 1341.

he characteristically disregarded Treasury and Department of Health advice on cost controls. Page's pharmaceutical benefits quickly incurred major cost overruns from the overuse of expensive drugs.³³

Other early measures also had strong public appeal: free milk for schoolchildren, a tuberculosis benefit scheme and the introduction in February 1951 of free medical treatment for pensioners, with free prescription medicines for pensioners commencing the following July. As the Commonwealth had powers only over quarantine and some social welfare benefits, the cooperation of the states was essential. Over 1950–51 Page negotiated with the states on complementary legislation for a Hospital Benefits Insurance Scheme based on means testing and voluntary insurance, largely successfully; only Queensland held out by insisting on free beds, until a change of state government occurred in 1957. In July–September 1951 he visited the United States and Canada to examine their voluntary systems of hospital and medical insurance, from which he concluded that 'the only practicable method that would relieve people from the fear of costly hospital and medical bills was through a system of voluntary insurance backed by governmental aid'.³⁴ The National Health Act passed in November 1953 marked the start of the Medical Benefits Scheme; its final item of legislation was passed in October 1955.

Page demonstrated skill and creativity as he put his scheme into place step by step over a five-year period, carefully designed around what the BMA would accept. The taxpayer-funded subsidisation of voluntary private insurance was provided on a claims basis as a refund for part of actual expenditure by patients for approved health care, not a more general subsidisation of private health insurance providers. The system was not universal – only means-tested pensioners received fully free medical services – and practitioners did not enter into direct contracts with the Commonwealth. Menzies later praised Page for his speech introducing the 1953 legislation as an exposition of the philosophy of maintaining the individual doctor–patient relationship and avoiding a fully nationalised, government-conducted scheme. He even declared health policy to be 'one of the high spots' of his prime ministership.³⁵

33 Gillespie, *The Price of Health*, pp. 257–9.

34 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 377.

35 Menzies, *The Measure of the Years*, p. 123.

Although the Page Scheme was the forerunner of subsequent public health benefits schemes, the foremost historian of Australian public health policy is critical of Page's efforts as 'a pragmatic, unplanned set of benefit programmes cobbled together in the face of intense suspicion from the BMA'.³⁶ Perhaps there was more consistency of purpose behind what Page designed than he is given credit for. In addition to wanting a system that supported self-help, he proposed the decentralisation and regionalisation of its administration. In a 1950 speech he told state health ministers he would leave management of national health policy to existing state machinery and that 'there should be an even further decentralisation of authority and administration'.³⁷ In a letter of 9 March that year to Bruce, he expressed a fear that a more generous scheme would degrade community independence, resulting in 'cynical indifference'.³⁸ The scheme stands as a major step in increased Commonwealth responsibility for health services.

Although Page remained proud of what is widely seen as one of his foremost achievements, in long, discursive speeches reviewing his career he portrayed this public health scheme as just one success alongside an array of developmentalist initiatives. Page still hankered for a major say in development policies. As he told the Cowper Federal Electorate Council in November 1956, 10 months after finally retiring from the front bench, 'my special position and knowledge made me of more value outside the Cabinet, although always ready and willing and available to give advice when needed'.³⁹ Even from the margins of political power, Page worked hard to draw the Menzies Government into accepting his developmentalist ideas.

One example is national economic planning. In the early 1950s, Page continued to bemoan the abolition of the DMC. He wrote to Bruce that, ever since, there had been 'no fact-finding nor comprehensive planning organisation in Australia adequate to deal with the problems facing us', and still decried 'the folly of Scullin's destruction of the organisation that was co-ordinating Federal and state policy as regards development

36 Gillespie, *The Price of Health*, p. 278. Other critics felt the Page Scheme was insufficiently targeted at low income groups; see for example Gwen Gray, 'Social policy', in Scott Prasser, J.R. Nethercote and John Warhurst (eds), *The Menzies Era: A Reappraisal of Government, Politics and Policy*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1995, p. 217.

37 Speech 15 August 1950, EPP, folder 2501.

38 EPP, folder 1821.

39 Speech by Page to Cowper Federal Electorate Council, 9 November 1956, EPP, folder 1805.

and collecting invaluable data'.⁴⁰ Despite the disdain of the public, planning remained a sufficiently persistent concept among policy-makers to nominally survive the advent of the second Menzies Government. Although Menzies abolished the Department of Post-War Reconstruction, many of its functions were shifted to other agencies, with the Industrial Development and Regional Resources divisions going to the newly created Department of National Development.⁴¹ This new agency raised Page's hopes. His sense of personal ownership of planning remained so strong that he entered the new government telling Casey as the minister for national development how best to organise his department so as to hoist development and planning atop the government's agenda.

Page's relationship with Casey was important to him. They had worked together on the National Council in 1938–39 and shared an interest in the TVA. Days after the 1949 election, Ulrich Ellis produced a written proposal, almost certainly in consultation with Page, entitled 'A General Approach to the Organisation of a National Development Scheme'. This effectively sought to revive the National Council proposal. It called for a hierarchy of planning agencies headed by a national development council with members from industry, supported by state councils and regional or zone councils.⁴² Both Page and Casey as new ministers were provided with a draft Cabinet paper on the Department of National Development prepared by the chair of the Public Service Commission, W.E. Dunk. This recommended very wide policy responsibilities for the department, including closer settlement, transport, water conservation, regional development, secondary industry and minerals. It would survey, plan and then enter into implementation agreements with state governments, again reminiscent of what Page had previously sought.⁴³

Page himself wrote to Casey at length about the department in terms that recycled ideas from 1938–39. He wanted a powerful central agency that guided the rest of government and advanced his own agenda – 'the immediate objective of the Department of Development [sic] must be to provide a plan to halt the appalling drift from the countryside'.⁴⁴

40 Page to Bruce, 9 March 1950 and 11 July 1951, EPP, folder 1821.

41 Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, p. 465.

42 Ellis, 'A General Approach to the Organisation of a National Development Scheme', 24 December 1949, EPP, folder 2076.

43 Draft Cabinet paper, with covering letter by W.E. Dunk, 12 January 1950 (earlier draft dated 27 December 1949), EPP, folder 2074.

44 Page to Casey, 9 January 1950, EPP, folder 2074.

It should be headed by someone the calibre of Essington Lewis, Tim Clapp or Charles Kemp. Like Dunk, he foresaw it coordinating policy with the states, including by surveying national resources and in promoting rural electrification. It would set long-term output targets for key industries including power, coal and steel. New sectoral planning authorities such as a joint coal board would bring governments together to 'carry out big schemes', and the Tariff Board would extend assistance to industries selected by the department.⁴⁵

In practice, however, the Department of National Development was subject to complaints from state governments and soon lost staff and powers in a government elsewhere focused. It was further sidelined by not inheriting the Economic Policy Division of the old Department of Post-War Reconstruction, which instead went to the Prime Minister's Department.⁴⁶ Casey moved on to the External Affairs portfolio in 1951 but maintained an occasional personal interest in development. In June 1952 he suggested to Cabinet a near-revival of Page's 1938–39 proposal: 'consideration should be given as to what pressure can be brought to bear in the Loan Council on the state governments, to oblige them to agree to the setting up of a non-political body to screen and to create a list of priorities in respect of state, semi-governmental and local governing body works'.⁴⁷ The two corresponded throughout the 1950s, marking Casey as perhaps the only minister of the time to engage gladly with Page beyond his responsibilities as health minister. It was significant for Page that Casey was not a major influence in Menzies's Cabinet, and so was more friend and sounding-board than effective ally. Hasluck observed that 'Casey was ineffective in Cabinet. I doubt whether there was any other minister during the time he was in Cabinet with me who lost so many submissions'.⁴⁸

Other recurrences of political interest in planning had an emphasis on defence strategy that overshadowed traces of Page's developmentalist vision. A National Security Resources Board modelled on an American

45 Undated document, 'Functions of the Department of Development', EPP, folder 2322.

46 A.J. Davies, 'National development', *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 4, December 1965, p. 48; see also A.J. Davies, 'National Development Under Australian Federalism: Politics or Economics', a paper presented to the Australasian Political Science Association conference, August 1965; W.J. Hudson, *Casey*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1986, pp. 208–11; David Lee, 'Cabinet', in Prasser, Nethercote and Warhurst, *The Menzies Era*, p. 127; and David Lowe, 'Menzies' national security state, 1950–53', in Frank Cain (ed.), *Menzies in War and Peace*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1997.

47 Submission by Casey to Cabinet, 24 June 1952, EPP, folder 2508.

48 Hasluck, *The Chance of Politics*, p. 86.

agency of the same name was established late in 1950 as a response to the Korean War. It was chaired by Menzies himself and had a mixed mandate to advise on the ‘balanced allocation of the nation’s resources as between defence, development, export production and the maintenance of the civilian economy’.⁴⁹ Despite Casey’s urging, it never attained an executive role before ceasing to function three years later. The Country Party’s November 1953 federal platform and policy called for ‘Commonwealth-state machinery to determine the priority’ of developmental projects.⁵⁰ In May 1954 Menzies proposed in his election policy speech a national development commission as ‘a small advisory body of highly expert persons’ that would report to the Commonwealth and the states, and depoliticise development policy – ‘in the absence of such a body, Australian development may be actually hindered by election promises about specific local projects, made without regard to any Australian pattern’.⁵¹ The commission was not formed as the states declined to be involved.⁵²

Such attempts to institute planning in whatever muted form were echoes of a receding sense that the nation was underperforming. The planning concept that Page had long nurtured still lingered, but wider political opinion usually accepted that the economy was doing well enough without comprehensive guidance from government. Page was far from being Australia’s only advocate of planning. S.J. Butlin wrote in 1955 that ‘part of the general thinking of all Australians on economic affairs is a not very coherent prejudice in favour of an increase in total “production”, specially the introduction of new industries, coupled with the assumption that the natural way to promote such new industries is government aid’.⁵³ John Crawford said at the end of the decade that ‘we are all planners now’ but in saying this employed a very expansive conception of planning, including by government establishing ‘shared belief’ in attainable objectives.⁵⁴ Page perhaps also owed something to the interest of economic and intellectual

49 Executive Member of the Board, economist E.R. Walker, quoted in Davies, ‘National development’, *Australian Quarterly*, p. 49. See also Davies, ‘National Development Under Australian Federalism’, pp. 19–26; Lee, ‘Cabinet’, in Prasser, Nethercote and Warhurst, *The Menzies Era*, pp. 128–30; and Curtis, ‘Planning for national development’, *Australian Quarterly*, pp. 52–3.

50 Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 4, folder 41(a).

51 Menzies quoted in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 May 1954, p. 4.

52 Davies, ‘National development’, *Australian Quarterly*, p. 51.

53 S.J. Butlin, *War Economy 1939–1942*, series 4 (Civil), volume 3, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945*, Canberra, Australian War Memorial, 1955, p. 9.

54 Quoted in Smyth, *Australian Social Policy*, p. 194.

figures in the indicative planning then popular in western Europe.⁵⁵ The second Menzies Government only toyed with planning; the concept never attracted sufficient support beyond intellectual advocates and defence concerns to become established policy. But no other Australian federal politician of senior standing still pursued economy-wide planning with anything like Page's tenacity or scale of conception. As its foremost political advocate in the 1950s, he at least helped to keep the concept under government consideration, albeit intermittently.

Page's lack of traction on such issues as planning was also attributable to his increasing distance from the new generation of Country Party MPs. Aitkin later wrote of a fundamental change in the organisation of the Country Party from its founding as 'little more than an extra-parliamentary committee formed by two primary producer organisations' into a post-war 'mass political party of familiar type'.⁵⁶ The Country Party's policy ambitions changed, narrowing as the very worst privations of rural life were eased by such improved amenities as the road, phone and radio services that Page had championed. Mainstream rural politics gradually hardened into a focus on managing such priorities as price stabilisation schemes, tax concessions and subsidies on inputs.⁵⁷ This overtook the sense of exclusion that had helped motivate the pre-war Country Party to instead give it a strong stake in extracting benefits from embedded government practice. Countrymindedness lingered, but was expressed through more conventional and mainstream policies. Geoffrey Blainey adds that rural protest declined after 1945 due to generally good weather and high prices: 'in the Menzies years the big country towns oozed prosperity' and 'the Australian countryside lived on clover'.⁵⁸ This is an

55 On interest in planning in the latter 1950s, see Heinz Arndt, *A Course through Life: Memoirs of an Australian Economist*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1985, pp. 49–50; and Peter Coleman, Selwyn Cornish and Peter Drake, *Arndt's Story: The Life of an Australian Economist*, ANU E Press and Asia Pacific Press, Canberra, 2007, pp. 201–2.

56 Don Aitkin, *The Country Party in New South Wales: A Study of Organisation and Survival*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1972, p. 21. This reference was primarily to the New South Wales Country Party; the two organisations are the FSA of New South Wales and the Graziers' Association of New South Wales.

57 Lloyd provides a succinct summary of agricultural policy in the 1950s; Lloyd, 'Agricultural price policy', in Williams, *Agriculture in the Australian Economy*, pp. 362–3. He adds that in 1952 the Commonwealth Government with AAC endorsement announced production targets for 1957–58, 'Australian agriculture's nearest approach in peacetime to indicative planning'.

58 Geoffrey Blainey, *This Land Is All Horizons: Australian Fears and Visions*, Boyer Lectures 2001, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney, 2001, pp. 37–8.

overstatement – the Korean War wool boom did not last and some rural industries sought protection from imports – but it remains that there was far less sense of rural crisis than in the inter-war years.

Page thus seemed a man out of time. Australia was now a more settled and prosperous nation, and his style of developmentalism became ill-fitted to a party increasingly sceptical of grand visions. A new consensus had emerged about Australian development being based on the steady management of national growth, and this was incorporated into structures of government that made only nominal provision for the visionary ventures of Earle Page.

There is no better illustration of Page's divergence from the rest of the Country Party than the contrasting world views presented in his speech of 28 July 1956 to its executive council in Perth and that on the same day in the same city by McEwen as minister for trade and industry to the annual general meeting of the Country Party of Western Australia. Page called for a national population of 30 million, new states and the emulation of the development of the United States, especially through decentralisation, mass migration, foreign capital and hydroelectricity. A national council of defence and development was needed to 'determine a pattern of development taking into account the economic and strategy factors associated with the size and locations of towns and cities'. McEwen's speech reported on recent economic growth, factory construction, exports and how stable commodity prices could encourage development in South-East Asia. His primary goal was stated simply and bluntly as 'fast and balanced growth'.⁵⁹ Page's post-war career draws out such changes in developmentalist thought. In the 1950s, developmentalism based on rural development was both challenged and supplemented by the nurturing of manufacturing, including outside the major cities, by protection from import competition, tax concessions and subsidised energy. Major enthusiasts for this approach included not only McEwen but also such prominent figures as Premier Thomas Playford of South Australia.⁶⁰ Development led by mining also began to gain prominence during the 1950s and 1960s, especially in Western Australia.⁶¹

59 Transcripts of both speeches are in the National Party of Australia records, NLA, MS 7507, series 1, box 1.

60 See David C. Rich, 'Tom's Vision?', in Bernard O'Neil, Judith Raftery and Kerrie Round (eds), *Playford's South Australia: Essays on the History of South Australia, 1933–1968*, Association of Professional Historians Inc., Adelaide, 1996, pp. 91–116.

61 Layman, 'Development Ideology in Western Australia'.

Page's persistence: Higher education, new states and hydroelectricity

Higher education was another field where Page ventured beyond his own health portfolio in trying to influence the wider agenda of the second Menzies Government. Unlike planning, the development of universities had the government's committed attention, but Page's interventions served mainly to illustrate how different his views were. They also marked him as one of the few senior political figures – including Menzies himself – who looked beyond the vocational dimension of universities to their role in shaping society. Page's long-standing involvement with the New England University College gave him a platform for public pronouncements. This institution finally became the fully autonomous University of New England in 1954. Page was installed as its first chancellor, a personal career highlight. At his 1956 speech to the dinner marking his retirement from the ministry, he described providing 'equal opportunities to the country student' as one of his lifetime objectives.⁶²

In retirement, Menzies recalled that during these years the numbers of young men and women seeking university entry 'had increased beyond all anticipation'.⁶³ Student enrolments almost doubled between 1945 and 1956 to reach 31,000.⁶⁴ Most political and educational commentators did not envisage a total re-engineering of universities but simply supported their expansion to cope with this burgeoning demand. Following prompting from the vice-chancellors of Australia's then nine universities, Menzies agreed to a more thorough inquiry into their needs than hitherto, and so in December 1956 appointed the Murray Committee on Australian Universities. Although Page's hope of reconfiguring higher education according to his ideas on decentralisation and the scale of institutions distanced him from the educational mainstream, his interest in education was sufficiently appreciated to earn him such invitations as to address the 1950 Canberra University College commencement ceremony on 'The Value of Decentralisation of University Education'. His public statements of this time are some of his most strident attacks on city life and are among the most passionate declarations of the importance of higher education by any Australian politician.

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

63 Menzies, *The Measure of the Years*, p. 82.

64 Martin, *Robert Menzies: A Life, Volume 2*, p. 397.

For Page, the central problem was not that existing universities were too small, but rather that they were too large to respond to rising demand. Their scale already imposed problems of the coordination of research and teaching that would only worsen should they continue to grow. Page concluded that ‘very large universities in capital cities can now do little more than provide technical or professional vocational training’. To ‘train good citizens in the true liberal tradition as well as good technicians’ required small institutions of about 300 to 750 students that offered accommodation and tutorial-based learning. The result would make each student ‘an active partner in a teacher–learner association rather than a passive recipient of pre-digested knowledge’.⁶⁵

Such small universities were not feasible in big cities with their high costs and petty distractions ‘so great that it would be very difficult to build up a corporate spirit upon which maximum success would depend’. So Page called for ‘a number of small universities placed at strategic points throughout the country districts’. These would be critically important in reversing population drift by conducting regional research and nurturing community leaders – ‘a united and properly balanced community must have available within itself all those factors which bind the region together and develop within it a community of interest’.⁶⁶ Ultimately, a national network of small universities would contribute to shaping the nation along Page’s favoured regionalised lines. The University of New England would serve ‘by example to inspire the launching of other similar enterprises in other parts of the Commonwealth to restore the balance in Australian development, to decentralise university education’.⁶⁷

Page’s speeches on education contain some of his most metaphysical and hyperbolic comments on decentralisation. His installation as chancellor provided a unique opportunity for him to proselytise before an audience that included vice-chancellors and government ministers. ‘Nature had taught the country dweller the need for balance’, he said, and ‘if the machine is out of balance the harder it works, the sooner it

65 ‘Speech by Sir Earle Page at the Graduation Ceremony of the University of New England, Armidale, Saturday, 16th April, 1955, at 2.30 P.M.’, EPP, folder 2636.

66 Earle Page, *The Value of Decentralisation of University Education in Australia: Being an Address Delivered at the Twenty-first Annual Commencement Ceremony of the Canberra University College on 28th March, 1950*, Canberra University College, Canberra, 1950, pp. 6, 8, 10.

67 ‘Speech by Sir Earle Page, Chancellor of the University of New England, Official Luncheon, Armidale, Thursday 4th August 1955’, EPP, folder 2321.

destroys itself.' Restoring such balance was 'my own lifetime ambition'.⁶⁸ He told the University of Queensland in May 1960 that its university college at Townsville would help 'prevent the growth of the mind and culture of both teachers and students being overlaid by mercantile or industrial factors which may destroy them unwittingly like a child can be suffocated by its drunken parents in bed'.⁶⁹ Such proclamations reflect the depth of Page's habitual drawing together of disparate concepts into a reinforcing whole – in this case, decentralisation, balance on a national scale, institutions small enough to nurture individuality and an exemplar institution to guide the entire nation.

Page's views on education carried too much extraneous baggage to win wider acceptance during the post-war growth of universities. The Murray Report pondered how universities could provide 'a full and true education', but reached conclusions that diverged from Page's ideas in their orientation to meeting growing demand for workforce skills. It recommended concentrating future university expansion in population centres, with only passing reference to small rural universities. Its canvassing of university residences failed to incorporate Page's ideas about tutorial-based education.⁷⁰ There were more influential individual players in the 1950s on university issues such as A.P. Rowe, vice-chancellor of the University of Adelaide, whose memoirs mention neither rural universities nor Page.⁷¹ Although Page's specific ideas were bypassed, A.W. Martin erred in stating that apart from Menzies it is 'hard to think of another federal politician at the time – with the very important exception of H.V. Evatt – who more revered, understood and often in an old-fashioned way romanticised, the ideal of a university'.⁷²

68 Page official dinner speech, 4 August 1955, on his installation as chancellor, transcript and as reported in the *Daily Examiner*, 5 August 1955; and speech at official luncheon on the same date; both at EPP, folder 2321.

69 Speech to mark the jubilee of the University of Queensland, May 1960 (day not given), EPP, folder 2133.

70 Committee on Australian Universities, *Report*, (the 'Murray Committee'), Commonwealth of Australia, Government Printer, Canberra, 1957, see pp. 8, 12, 39, 54–5, 89. The committee noted the relatively good performance of residential students.

71 A.W. Martin, 'R.G. Menzies and the Murray Committee', in F.B. Smith and P. Crichton (eds), *Ideas for Histories of Universities in Australia*, Division of Historical Studies, Research School of Social Sciences, The Australian National University, Canberra, 1990, p. 104; A. P. Rowe, *If the Gown Fits*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, Vic., 1960.

72 Martin, 'R.G. Menzies and the Murray Committee', p. 99.

By contrast with his involvement in planning and higher education – two fields with some basis in the government’s policies – Page as health minister largely suspended his public campaigning on new states. As in the Bruce–Page days, it would have been difficult to reconcile such activity with his status as a Commonwealth minister. His public comments on this topic became sporadic, such as his 1951 pondering of ‘some biological reason’ why cities over 50,000 cannot maintain themselves without absorbing rural migrants ‘into their vortex’.⁷³ Page’s absence from active campaigning is one reason why there was little effective political support for new states and decentralisation in the 1950s. Country Party and community interest dwindled: the party’s 1953 platform made only vague references to new states, decentralisation and ‘local control of local affairs’.⁷⁴ Governments were only politely sympathetic. In 1957 the Country Party premier of Queensland, Frank Nicklin, declared himself willing to test public opinion formally on dividing the state should he receive sufficiently large petitions: that this offer came to nothing was often remarked upon by remaining new staters.⁷⁵ There was more interest in intellectual quarters. *Current Affairs Bulletin* devoted an issue to new states in 1950 and four years later the Institute of Public Affairs produced a booklet advocating a petition-referendum formula for their creation.⁷⁶

Ulrich Ellis temporarily assumed Page’s role as the public face of new statism. From 1946 he effectively personally constituted the Canberra-based Office of Rural Research from which he issued a stream of publications before resigning in 1960 to concentrate on the New England separation campaign. Ellis was prominent at a major joint conference convened at Corowa in July–August 1951 of the New England New State Movement, the Murray Valley Development League and the Murrumbidgee Valley Water Users’ Association. Visible as Ellis was, there are signs that Page was an influence behind the scenes. In October 1955 Ellis sought Page’s comments concerning a draft bill on the division of assets and liabilities between parent states and their new state offspring.⁷⁷ A few stalwarts of the old Country Party–new state network remained active. Drummond now

73 Statement, 5 January 1951, EPP, folder 1627.

74 Country Party 1953 Platform, copy in EPP, folder 1685.

75 From the account of the new state movement written by Thompson for Page, EPP, folder 2146, p. 5.

76 ‘New states’, *Current Affairs Bulletin*, vol. 6, no. 12, 28 August 1950; Institute of Public Affairs (New South Wales), *Safeguard Your Rights by Review of the Constitution*, IPA (New South Wales), Sydney, October 1954, p. 18.

77 Ellis to Page, 14 October 1955, EPP, folder 2020.

chaired the Australian Decentralisation and Development Committee (secretary, Ulrich Ellis) that lobbied premiers and federal ministers on the outcomes of the Corowa conference.⁷⁸

Page was far less inhibited in publicly promoting the Clarence hydroelectricity project, evidently judging that his role as local member made this compatible with his ministerial status. In the early 1950s the Clarence issue was driven by a series of expert reports. Repeatedly disappointed but never deterred, Page kept seeking one that delivered the conclusively positive findings he needed. That these studies were undertaken at all owed much to his persistence. In 1951 the New South Wales Government's Technical Committee, appointed following Page's post-war lobbying, finally recommended a dual purpose flood mitigation and hydroelectricity dam, and the fuller investigation of the wider Clarence catchment.⁷⁹ The New South Wales director of public works, J.M. Main, later wrote to Page criticising these recommendations as having been 'of a preliminary nature particularly in regard to the economics of hydroelectric power generation'.⁸⁰ Main himself chaired the most substantive of all the Clarence reports, the 1951–55 'Clarence Advisory Committee on the Development of the Resources of the Clarence Valley'. This report dismissed the Technical Committee's findings and recommended that state electricity authorities be left to make their own decisions in the wider context of thermal and Snowy Scheme developments.⁸¹ As the decade dragged on with little to show, Page was by 1954 floating a much smaller proposal to further develop the Nymboida.⁸²

It is remarkable that Page managed to keep hydroelectricity on the agenda of governments at all given the results of these studies and further shifts in professional interest towards nuclear and thermal power. The Snowy Scheme did not spark wider support for hydroelectricity. Even William Hudson, manager of the Snowy, publicly conceded that hydroelectricity was limited by geography and high initial capital costs.⁸³ Local government also had doubts. Joe Cahill, as New South Wales minister for

78 Such as a deputation to the prime minister in April 1952; see Ulrich Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 22, series 7B, folder 99.

79 Extract from the Technical Committee report, EPP, folder 1798; this folder also has a copy of the 1951–5 report that summarises and critiques the Technical Committee.

80 Main to Page, 25 October 1957, EPP, folder 2595.

81 See copy of report in EPP, folder 2592.

82 'Abundant and Permanently Cheap Electricity for Progressive Northern Development' – a 'statement' by Page, no date but c. 1954, EPP, folder 2324.

83 N.R. Wills (ed.), *Australia's Power Resources: Papers Read at the 1954 Winter Forum of the Victorian Group of the Australian Institute of Political Science*, F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1955, pp. 64–5.

local government, a long-standing Page target, claimed in January 1952 that the Clarence River County Council actually preferred a number of smaller schemes to The Gorge and pointed out that the state's Electricity Authority opposed reliance on hydroelectricity given 'the hydrological and field work which is required'.⁸⁴ Perhaps worst of all for Page, the Commonwealth minister for national development, Bill Spooner, estimated in 1955 that coal reserves in the three mainland eastern states would meet power requirements for the next 50 years.⁸⁵

The British social historian Bill Luckin concluded that the British Electrical Development Association was most successful when it appealed to rural sentiment by drawing on 'existing cultural repertoires while simultaneously generating novel images of technological superiority, cultural modernity and near-universal access'.⁸⁶ There is some parallel here with how Page's hydroelectric activism was limited by failure to attract the interest of his various allies on other causes, even the new staters. That Page never entirely swallowed his disappointment at the choice of the Snowy over the Clarence further isolated him as the former became a national showcase. His efforts also affirmed that his political influence remained greatest in local government, not the state level that was responsible for most power projects. The locally run Nymboida power station of 1924 remained his foremost success in electrification.

Page leaves the ministry to pursue his vision

Page announced his resignation from the Menzies ministry immediately after the government was re-elected in December 1955 and retired to the backbenches the following month. His last major official policy initiative had been legislation to amend his National Health Act of 1953. In announcing his retirement, Page listed the issues he would henceforth pursue: water conservation, hydroelectricity, new states and decentralisation.⁸⁷ He also lamented that although 'the only way Federation can continue to exist is through a series of co-operative partners', the 'city

84 Cahill to Page, 15 January 1956, EPP, folder 2056.

85 Quoted in Alice Cawte, *Atomic Australia 1944–1990*, UNSW Press, Kensington, 1992, p. 103.

86 Luckin, *Questions of Power*, p. 17.

87 *West Australian*, 13 December 1955, clipping at EPP, folder 1683.

people don't know about the country'. Page now thought that what the nation needed was 'cities of 200,000 people every 50 miles throughout this country, not just a few monster cities on the coast'.⁸⁸

The second Menzies Government presided in the 1950s over a nation undergoing rapid change – high population growth, a younger population, rising material affluence and greater cultural diversity than ever before. But the decade was not to be an era of major innovation in development policy. In the latter 1950s there emerged a perception that Menzies himself was disengaged from many of the transformations over which his government presided. Articulate criticism of a seemingly unimaginative national leadership was led by such figures as John Douglas Pringle, the British expatriate editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*.⁸⁹ (Menzies vigorously defended his domestic record, such as in his second volume of memoirs, *The Measure of the Years*.)

Page became the fortuitous beneficiary of this perception. Immediately he was free of the strictures of public office, Page campaigned as an effectively autonomous MP dedicated to realising what he saw as the missed opportunities of the post-war and Menzies eras. The reaction to his urging had two distinct dimensions. One suggests that political interest in interventionist-based national development was now at one of its lowest ebbs in twentieth-century Australian history. But against this, there remained a lively popular and cultural interest in grand developmentalist visions that was reflected in press coverage lauding Page for presenting an appealing contrast as the elder statesman of national development. Page tapped into this.

Page resumed trying to persuade the Country Party to make a practical rather than nominal commitment to new states and related causes, and did not hesitate to berate the government of which he was nominally still a member. He spoke only occasionally in the House but, when he did, it was often at length to reassert an entire vision of the nation's future. A typical effort was his response to the 1957–58 Budget. This speech ranged across northern development, regional self-government, public debt, the incidence of tuberculosis, mental health, decentralisation, foreign investment, new states, national productivity, the dairy industry, water use, marketing of Australian exports and hydroelectricity.⁹⁰

88 Quoted in the *Daily Telegraph*, 17 December 1955, clipping at EPP, folder 1683.

89 John Douglas Pringle, *Australian Accent*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1978 (first published 1958).

90 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 12 September 1957, pp. 600–5.

Page tied his late career ideas together more coherently when he spoke to the Australian Provincial Press Association conference in October 1956 – the very same forum he had addressed in 1917. Nearly four decades on, his goals for the nation's economy and society remained essentially unchanged but for a clearer stress on planning. Decentralisation would be 'greatly assisted by a system of priorities for government expenditure taking into account both defence and development projects along planned lines'. Councils should be empowered to enter into franchise agreements with the private sector on development projects. The local press had a positive duty to 'force the hands of government along the proper course of action that will give the best results'.⁹¹

One of the new backbencher's first initiatives was an attempt to revive national planning. Page had retained a curiosity about the wider world that dated back to his early travels in New Zealand and North America. In retirement, he scanned the constitutions and policy statements of recently independent former British colonies for ideas on planned development. After visiting the Indian subcontinent in March 1956, he told the House of the deep impression made on him by India's and Pakistan's planned use of rivers and by the Indian National Development Council. This council demonstrated that it was possible to resolve 'the eternal wrangling between the states and the Commonwealth over the disposal of revenue, and fix priorities for the undertakings necessary in Australia'.⁹² It appears to have inspired Page's last concerted effort on planning. As in 1938, Page began by approaching a powerful business figure. In April 1956 he contacted the stockbroker and grazier Samuel Hordern, seeking to discuss:

the leadership that might be given to the business and financial world in Australia by some one with your reputation, influence and contacts to make possible the earliest change in our long-range planning that would put in [sic] a position similar to that of the United States in its period of very active growth.⁹³

But this 1956 effort seems have come to nothing.

91 Speech by Page to Australian Provincial Press Conference, Brisbane, no date but from 1956, EPP, folder 2607. The *Australian Newspaper History Group Newsletter* specifies 18 October 1956 and Sydney as the venue. The association changed its title from 'Australasian' to 'Australian' in 1925.

92 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 22 May 1956, pp. 2319–23.

93 Page to Hordern, 23 April 1956, EPP, folder 2608. This appears to have been the Samuel Hordern who was born in 1909, not his father of the same name who in 1956 was a semi-invalid of 80 years of age and who died in June that year.

Page also resumed public campaigning for new states for the first time since 1949. His speech on the 1957–58 Budget praised Victoria as the most economically balanced of the six states: 'I believe that if we could have a number of states of the size of Victoria in this continent of ours we would see very rapid development'.⁹⁴ He corresponded with the Capricornia movement in central Queensland on their lack of success, attributed simply by Page to public apathy. Notwithstanding the disappointing Cohen experience of over 30 years earlier, he suggested they seek a royal commission.⁹⁵ In an October 1961 speech to the New England New State Annual Convention he proposed a fresh formula for his federal units: 'about 5 degrees of latitude of coastline and their capital cities no more than 200 miles from practically all parts of the state'. Page reminded the convention that he had been 'the leader of this movement in the Federal Parliament for over 40 years'.⁹⁶

But the issue that attracted the greatest share of the elderly Page's still formidable energy was that which retained the greatest emotional resonance for him – the harnessing of the Clarence River. In a May 1956 speech to the House he complained of how the Department of National Development still lacked a strategy for the national integration of electricity systems. By contrast, the old DMC had worked well with the states so that 'magnificent projects were put into effect with complete amity and accord' – a considerable exaggeration, but with some basis.⁹⁷ Page even dealt with yet another report on the Clarence, commissioned by the Electricity Commission of New South Wales from the American consulting company Ebasco. Contrary to his idealisation of the private sector as more broad-minded than government, Ebasco cautiously concluded that The Gorge could best be developed after about 1980. For the present, local demand was just too small. This assessment attracted Page's bitter attacks for ignoring the potential stimulus to local development and how linking the Clarence and southern Queensland regions could make the project viable.⁹⁸ Page organised what must have

94 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 12 September 1957, p. 603.

95 Page to A.E. Webb, Honorary Secretary, Capricornia New State Movement, 14 December 1959, EPP, folder 2310.

96 'Speech by the Rt. Hon. Sir Earle Page, MP at Annual Convention of New England New State Movement', Grafton, 13 October 1961, New England New State Movement, Armidale, UNE Archives, A547, box 33, pp. 1, 4.

97 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 22 May 1956, p. 2320.

98 'Local Government Enquiry Commencing at Grafton on 10th September 1956', EPP, folder 1798, pp. 9–10.

been an awkward lunch with the chair of the Ebasco study. Page claimed the chair was puzzled as to why he had not been asked to investigate the project's wider benefits.⁹⁹

Page responded to continued frustrations with his habitual fall-back strategy of trying to harness local councils. In 1956 he issued a new booklet reviving the Clarence Valley Authority idea, but now tied this to the restructure of local government. The authority would provide 'a ray of hope thrown out for our general future overseas financial relationships' and could even arrange international loans linked to migration (again reminiscent of the Migration Agreement of the 1920s).¹⁰⁰ The *Daily Examiner* dutifully supported a proposal to group shires into a new county council that could 'control the whole river'.¹⁰¹ Despite such enthusiasm, Page took care to present his plans as measured and realistic. He scorned an intermittently appearing variant of developmentalism: proposals for gargantuan engineering projects to exploit water resources. The most famed of these are the Bradfield and Idriess plans to irrigate Australia's interior by such means as diverting water from Queensland rivers. Page responded by collecting material critical of them, including an assessment from the civil engineer John R. Burton that such proposals were 'physically impossible'. Page agreed that 'facts and not mere surmises' were what was needed.¹⁰²

Page also engaged with two late and unexpected forums for his developmentalist agenda. These were novel in nature for him and each provided further confirmation of how the policy environment had changed. One was a major inquiry by a parliamentary committee into constitutional reform, the most comprehensive such review of the Constitution since the Peden Royal Commission. The other was an expert inquiry into the dairy industry which presaged the extension of market-oriented economic analysis to the rural sector. The results of both exercises underlined the decline in political appetite for major developmentalist-oriented change. But they also showed that Page remained well capable of presenting his ideas with force and clarity, and was adept at capturing attention.

99 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 12 September 1957, p. 604.

100 Earle Page, *Unique Opportunity for Co-ordinated National Development Based on Proposals for the Clarence*, p. 6; no date or place of publication, but internal evidence suggests Grafton in 1956.

101 *Daily Examiner*, 16 June 1956, clipping in EPP, folder 1798.

102 Burton's 1959 assessment and other material on the Bradfield Plan and related issues by F.R.V. Timbury, Griffith Taylor et al. is in EPP, folder 1758.

The Joint Committee on Constitutional Review established in May 1956 attracted Page's last concerted attempts to amend section 124 on the creation of new states and to reform Australian federalism. New state activists had been lobbying for a constitutional review since the early 1950s. It was potentially a very influential inquiry, with membership that included Arthur Calwell, David Drummond, Alexander Downer and Gough Whitlam.¹⁰³ Page's fulsome evidence to the committee was perhaps the most comprehensive call for constitutional change by a senior political figure of this time. In his January 1957 submission, Page reflected that he had been pursuing constitutional reform for decades 'like Sisyphus', with the 1928 referendum his sole success. With characteristic optimism and overstatement, he asserted that there was now 'universal agreement that decentralisation of local administration and a balance in the Commonwealth Parliament are essential to efficient and satisfactory government'.¹⁰⁴ Page also identified himself as the creator of four major cooperative bodies – the Loan Council, the AAC, the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Federal Transport Council.¹⁰⁵

Page detailed in his evidence several variations on the theme that authority to create a new state should be shifted from state parliaments to a formula based on local petitions, referenda within the state and the area concerned, and final approval by the Commonwealth Parliament.¹⁰⁶ His fundamental arguments for new states were increasingly ingenious but continued to reflect faith that a simple adjustment or two in governance would ensure the desired outcome. He told the committee that new states would hasten constitutional reform by making it easier to satisfy the requirement for a majority of states to support a 'yes' vote at referendums. With only six states, four needed to vote 'yes' to approve a constitutional amendment, a majority of two to one; with more states, the proportion required in favour would fall. New states, he seemed to assume, would surely be more open-minded on constitutional change. They would also, he said, improve consistency in national regulation of the economy by increasing the proportion of commerce crossing state borders and hence

103 The committee was said to have been important in forming Whitlam's ideas on constitutional reform and the aggressive use of section 96 tied grants to the states; see Jenny Hocking, *Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History*, The Miegunyah Press, Carlton, Vic., 2008, pp. 181–6.

104 'Statement by Sir Earle Page on Constitutional Amendments Made to a Meeting of the Federal Parliamentary Constitutional Committee Held in Sydney in January 1957', EPP, folder 1659, p. 1.

105 Transcript of Page's evidence to parliamentary constitutional review committee, 15 January 1957, Sydney, EPP, folder 1660, p. 52.

106 'Statement by Sir Earle Page on Constitutional Amendments ...', EPP, folder 1659, pp. 5–13.

falling under nationally consistent federal law. Even more indirectly, Page thought that the existence of a greater number of states would encourage industry to work out formulae for preventing duplication in arbitration decisions.¹⁰⁷

Page also proposed that national government now be radically reordered along cooperative lines using federal–state councils, akin to what he had called for in 1942 – ‘Cabinets of the governments of Australia’ that would take the Loan Council and the AAC as exemplars. They would operate initially on a voluntary basis ‘that accustoms the public to their existence’, prior to being put to referendum for elevation to constitutional status. He proposed a supplementary loan council to coordinate semi-governmental and local government finances; a new federal transport council that would also cover hydroelectricity and flood control; and a council of taxation to collect revenue for all governments. Education was also ‘eminently suited to a combined Federal–state approach’: perhaps the two levels of government could share tertiary or technical education, or the Commonwealth take responsibility for a particular subject.¹⁰⁸ Page additionally wanted a new interstate commission to deal with cross-border issues such as water use, and to investigate discrimination in interstate commerce and assistance to the states.¹⁰⁹

He was also thinking about how to simplify amendment of the Constitution. Having long seen the Constitution as an obstacle to policy innovation, Page told the committee that parliament should be able to amend basic ‘machinery of government’ provisions itself. Only wider ‘principles of government’ changes should require a referendum, an idea borrowed from the Indian constitution. Eventually, he hoped, ‘we can obtain amendment without referendum’ by agreeing changes with the state parliaments alone.¹¹⁰ Interestingly, Page commented here that the success of the 1928 referendum on the Financial Agreement owed something to the ballot paper presenting voters with a choice of ‘1’ or ‘2’ to tick rather than ‘yes’ or ‘no’, electors being reluctant to directly say

107 *Ibid.*, pp. 3–5.

108 *Ibid.*, pp. 14–17.

109 *Ibid.*, p. 4; also transcript of Page’s evidence to the committee, EPP, folder 1660, pp. 7, 45–6. An Interstate Commission was established in 1912 but achieved little before being effectively dissolved in 1920.

110 Transcript of Page’s evidence, *ibid.*, pp. 18–19, 48.

'yes' to more power for government. 'Fear', he reflected, 'is nearly always the dominating factor that determines the way people vote at an election or referendum.'¹¹¹

Page was rarely one to advocate cautious incremental change, especially if he judged the time right for a realignment. His evidence to the Joint Committee on Constitutional Review is a good example. The committee's report handed down in 1958 included among its many recommendations the amendment of section 124 to enable creation of a new state if supported by referendum both in the area concerned and in the whole state affected.¹¹² Although Page in his memoirs contrived to hail this as finally signalling that 'the acceptance of the new states idea is no longer in doubt', this was almost the only Page proposal the committee adopted.¹¹³ (It also called for new Commonwealth powers to overcome section 92's inhibiting of primary product marketing.)¹¹⁴ As a multiparty entity, the committee was prone to compromise. Cooperative federalism was effectively ignored, and on constitutional amendment the committee merely recommended a limited watering down of the referendum formula by requiring approval by only three states. The committee, Page's last major engagement with issues of constitutional reform and cooperative federalism, effectively rejected his vision of radical change.

The other inquiry with which Page grappled in these last years of his career presented an even greater challenge, an encounter with rigorous economic analysis. The Commonwealth's 1960 Dairy Industry Committee of Enquiry was a pioneering study of the economic and social outcomes of rural industry assistance.¹¹⁵ It arose from concerns that continuing subsidisation of the dairy industry was inefficient and had effectively institutionalised low-income small-scale farming. Page could not ignore this important review, especially given dairy's importance in the Grafton area. His evidence went far beyond the subsidisation that industry lobbyists so vigorously defended to instead propose nationwide action on such 'production side' issues as fodder conservation, water conservation, hydroelectricity, soft loans to fund irrigation, research and transport

111 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

112 Australia, Parliament, Joint Committee on Constitutional Review, *Report from the Joint Committee on Constitutional Review*, Government Printer, Canberra, 1958, p. 21.

113 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 382.

114 Joint Committee on Constitutional Review, *Report*, p. 19.

115 Australia, Parliament, Dairy Industry Committee of Enquiry, *Report of the Dairy Industry Committee of Enquiry on the Australian Dairy Industry*, Government Printer, Canberra, 1960.

coordination. He opposed any restriction of production, but his defence of subsidisation was lukewarm: this could ‘scale down’ in the long term once production issues had been dealt with.¹¹⁶

Significantly, the committee sought advice from two professors of economics, Richard Downing and Peter Karmel. They proved highly critical of the extent of assistance provided to the industry in reaching their conclusion that some of the capital and labour it employed ‘could be more productively employed elsewhere’.¹¹⁷ The committee’s final report accorded Page’s evidence a three-paragraph summary and analysis of its own, a somewhat flattering nod to his special prominence. It professed to recognise ‘the value of national schemes of such importance’ and went on to recommend that financial assistance to increase the productivity of eligible farmers covering, among much else, fodder conservation, irrigation and water conservation.

But the committee was otherwise deterred by the sheer scale of Page’s proposals, concluding that ‘they are of such magnitude and would be so costly as to require examination and evaluation by experts’. Its main findings were ‘that the industry should be re-formed on a sounder economic basis’, that ‘direct financial assistance should be dispensed with as soon as possible’ and ‘the direction of assistance should be gradually changed from income-increasing to cost-reducing’. A small number of farms that could never be viable ‘will need to be eased out of the industry’.¹¹⁸ Although such conclusions were effectively dismissed by the government, this inquiry was a clear sign of a new preparedness to apply economic analysis to rural industries that continued to grow beyond Page’s time. The federal government’s response to the final report was classically dismissive. It committed itself only ‘to discuss with the state governments and the industry the question of the reconstruction of the industry, taking into consideration the views of the industry’.¹¹⁹

116 Page’s evidence of 1 March 1960, EPP, folders 1157, 2023.

117 A summary of Downing and Karmel’s findings is provided in Dairy Industry Committee of Enquiry, *Report*, pp. 77–8.

118 Dairy Industry Committee of Enquiry, *Report*, pp. 101–2: the committee’s findings are at pp. 115–17.

119 EPP, folder 2127.

Page's final campaigns: 'I want to see the work completed before I die'

Page remained as active as ever to the very end, both on policy and personal fronts. Ethel Page died in May 1958. A year later Earle married his long-serving secretary, Jean Thomas, with Stanley Bruce best man at the ceremony at London's St Paul's Cathedral. The second Lady Page died in 2011. Ann Moyal, the young historian who worked with the elderly Page on his memoirs, recalled fondly his 'merriment and verve' even in this late stage of his life. Though Page was a 'fiery particle', she noted that he forgave political enemies.¹²⁰ Ellis agreed, himself recalling Page's long-standing tendency to separate policy disputes from personalities and his generally 'happy view of life'.¹²¹

But privately, Page in these final years remained baffled by his continuing failure to make substantive policy progress. With time and repeated disappointment, a sense of stridency entered his pronouncements as he sought to reverse declining interest in his brand of developmentalism. Ever one to seek out topical new arguments, he warned that by developing the coalfields stretching from the Hunter Valley to Port Kembla, the New South Wales Government was merely creating 'a neat target for atomic bombs'.¹²² Page noted the ideas of physicist Marcus Oliphant on how decentralisation could limit the effects of nuclear attack.¹²³

Continued lack of progress on the Clarence now loomed as his foremost anxiety. He professed himself 'amazed that no proper analysis has been made of what is called the ancillary benefits that would be gained from the harnessing of these waters'.¹²⁴ Page turned increasingly to appeals via the press. His now well-established persona as the elder statesman of national development provided a ready basis for articles ridiculing governments, most spectacularly a piece in *Australian Country Magazine* of September 1959 entitled 'Our Second Snowy – Wasted'. This presented a suite of photos of Page gazing out over the Clarence River and even drinking its waters. The accompanying text highlighted his 'all Australian, non-political

120 Ann Moyal, *Breakfast with Beaverbrook: Memoirs of an Independent Woman*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1995, p. 150.

121 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 240.

122 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 12 September 1957, p. 604.

123 Undated notes titled 'Marcus Oliphant', possibly a record of discussion, EPP, folder 2035.

124 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 12 September 1957, p. 604.

standpoint' and called Page 'energetic, nimble-minded'. Perhaps the end result of his campaigning would be dubbed the Earle Page Dam.¹²⁵ Even Gough Whitlam, Labor deputy leader and rising political star, applied the elder statesman tag to Page during the parliamentary debate on the report of the constitutional committee, without evident irony.¹²⁶

Page had by the late 1950s also firmly grasped the mantle of party elder: no doubt this helped colleagues tolerate his hectoring on regionalism and planning. He was respected more for his longevity and role in the Country Party's early success than for his current policy views. At the party's April 1957 Annual Conference held at Rockhampton, he reminded colleagues what it had once stood for and listed its past 'many great reforms which stand out as bulwarks and milestones of national progress'. These included 'the co-operation of the sugar industry'; organised marketing of butter, wheat and canned fruit; the tariffs needed to 'sustain the system' of organised marketing; coordination of state and federal borrowing; a central bank; the rural credits system; the independence of the Commonwealth Savings Bank; tax concessions for rural development; the Federal Aid Roads system; the 'National Health Insurance Scheme'; tuberculosis eradication; the CSIR; free school milk; the Wool Research Organisation; and the Meat Board.¹²⁷ Page presented a slideshow to encourage delegates to take new states and the TVA seriously.¹²⁸ But while the party's 1958 federal platform provided for a Commonwealth–state commission to undertake the 'economic analysis of river basin projects', and for a Commonwealth–state planning authority 'accompanied by machinery to determine the priority of projects', neither was implemented.¹²⁹

Not that Page admitted defeat – that would not have been the man. One of his last efforts on planning was a September 1960 speech to the House in which he again called for 'a permanent body' of experts to cover 'all the various forms of development and such matters as education', using 'the Loan Council machinery'.¹³⁰ Two months later, the now 80-year-old Page

125 *Australian Country Magazine*, September 1959, pp. 14–17, 91, copy at EPP, folder 2589. Another example of Page using the popular press is 'Wasted wealth of the Clarence', *Pix* magazine, 13 November 1948, Sydney, pp. 20–3, copy at EPP, folder 2553.

126 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 13 April 1961, pp. 820, 822.

127 Page speech to Country Party Annual Conference, 12 April 1957, EPP, folder 2607.

128 A list of the slides is at EPP, folder 2622 but not the slides themselves.

129 Country Party Federal Platform and Policy, July 1958, Earle Page papers, UNE Archives, A180, box 3, folder 29, p. 7.

130 EPP, folder 2141; the wording recorded by Hansard is slightly different, see *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 7 September 1960, pp. 893–4.

returned to the fray at the Country Party Federal Council by pointing out that as the early party had faced an 'inelastic Australian Federal System, which limited combined national effort', it 'at once specialised on devising practical machinery for such fruitful governmental co-operation'. But he also regretted his own continued failure to harness the nation's water resources and so called on the council to endorse a permanent organisation of all tiers of government to develop a 'control programme of all the waters of Australia'.¹³¹

Right up to the very end of his life, Page remained the main parliamentary spokesman for new statism. Indeed, his last major parliamentary speech – effectively the end of his public career – was part of the 12 October 1961 debate on the Constitutional Committee's findings on new states. (His very last speech to the House was a shorter statement of 19 October on rail gauge standardisation; typically, he noted that the Bruce–Page Government had proposed this nearly 40 years earlier.) This debate was a last reminder of the difficulties he still faced. Page described the committee's report as the first ever unanimity in the federal parliament on constitutional reform. He recounted the Commonwealth's 1926 offer to take over Western Australia's north, wistfully inviting his audience to 'imagine the vast development that would have occurred under such a plan as this'.¹³² Page's interest in Northern Australia was more often lukewarm: he had four months earlier pulled out of a parliamentarians' trip to the north so he could instead visit the United States at the behest of private insurance companies to help the 'fight against the nationalisation of medicine'.¹³³ His hopes of elevating development policy above party politics now received a last blow. In supporting the amendment of section 124, Whitlam added that although the ALP 'is not averse to new states' it was 'averse to sovereign states'.¹³⁴ Labor's Clyde Cameron added a well-researched yet still fundamentally unfair personal attack on Page for failing to push new states while a minister between the wars.¹³⁵ Support from his own Country Party, let alone the Liberals, was conspicuously thin. Only F.A. Bland, now a Liberal MP, chipped in supporting new states and local government as barriers to 'administrative centralisation which would destroy our democratic way of life'.¹³⁶

131 Page speech to Country Party Federal Council, 25–26 November 1960, EPP, folder 2021.

132 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 12 October 1961, p. 1985.

133 Page to C.S. Christian of CSIRO, 9 June 1961, EPP, folder 2031.

134 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 12 October 1961, p. 1991.

135 *Ibid.*, pp. 2013–16.

136 *Ibid.*, p. 2001.

Page was ending his public life more politically isolated than ever. Although there was still support for elements of his ideas, few if any MPs other than Drummond shared his breadth of synthesis. The new state movement was by this time showing every sign of becoming one of Australia's greatest lost causes. This bewildered Ellis, Thompson and Page himself. Ellis wrote of the Country Party's 'inexplicable reluctance' to insist on decentralisation.¹³⁷ Page simply pointed to the self-interest of cities and local political ignorance. Yet creating new states out of old is difficult in any representative democracy. Political scientist R.S. Parker identified only three notable international instances: Kentucky, Maine and West Virginia in the United States.¹³⁸ Australia's own three breakaways came in the nineteenth century when boundaries were still formative; by the early 1960s Australians had long been accustomed to their existing states and were wary of constitutional change.¹³⁹ Although new state advocates complained vociferously about constitutional barriers, section 124 has the merit of clarity. Constitutions are meant to provide certainty, not the instability that would occur if a referendum were to be triggered whenever a local grievance arose. Nor could any constitutional formula avoid the immense practical difficulties of dividing old states into new.

Page in retirement from office remained unable to answer convincingly Cohen's devastating critique of three-and-a-half decades earlier. New state movements had only been effective when by combining widespread public support with political leadership from figures like Page they were able to secure additional government resources, notably in northern New South Wales. Popular support was far less stable than intellectual interest, hence historian R.G. Neal's observation that the new state movements were 'stronger as means to ends, than as ends in themselves'.¹⁴⁰ The importance of material concerns resulted in their fluctuating with local economic peaks and troughs. While such assessments underestimate the passions

137 Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 8.

138 Parker, 'Why New States?', in Parker et al., p. 1. Harman also points to Canadian provinces created after confederation in 1867; see Harman, 'New State Agitation in Northern New South Wales', p. 26.

139 There are some more recent new state sympathisers. Geoffrey Blainey, for example, feels that although federalism is apt for so large a country, too few states were created for it to function well; see Wayne Hudson and A.J. Brown (eds), *Restructuring Australia: Regionalism, Republicanism and Reform of the Nation State*, The Federation Press, Sydney, 2004, p. 27; also 'Call for North Queensland to split', *Cairns Post*, 25 November 2009.

140 Neale, 'New States Movement', pp. 12–13, 23.

and ideals that the separatist cause was capable of raising at times, the rise of the Country Party probably helped head off new states by providing more conventional political means of dealing with regional grievances.

Page committed himself to leaving a written legacy by producing his memoirs. He had discussed this with Ellis prior to the war and in 1939 told Drummond that he hoped to write a book on 'the aspirations, ideals, philosophy and history of our work for those who come after us to have a touchstone for their job'.¹⁴¹ In 1943 he tried to have Ellis released from the Department of Munitions to work on a book that would 'shed important light on post-war problems and the manner of their solution', eventually settling on an autobiography as the most effective approach. After various false starts, the writing process finally began in January 1956 with Page dictating much of the text and Ellis making refinements. By 1958 the draft 'was reaching alarming proportions', complicating Page's efforts to interest a London publisher. It was only rendered publishable posthumously in 1963 following extensive and skilful editing by Ann Moyal (then Mozley).¹⁴² The result, *Truant Surgeon*, constitutes both an overt attempt to guide future policy and a tacit admission of unfinished business that he hoped others would conclude in his absence. Throughout he stoutly defended his record of policy achievement, attributing failures to others being unable to appreciate his vision of the nation. John Latham reviewed it favourably as 'a real contribution to Australian political history by a highly competent patriotic Australian', despite the drawback that Page 'does not say much about any contrary opinions'.¹⁴³

Page also hoped to produce a separate book on electricity and water. This was to be called *Missed Opportunities: Turning Water into Gold* and may well have been more important to him.¹⁴⁴ Although this other volume was never completed, his published memoirs concluded with a succinct statement of his formula for Australian developmentalism that touched on his continuing commitment to regionalism, strong central government, hydroelectricity, cooperative federalism and planning:

141 Page to Drummond, 15 April 1939, EPP, folio 2706.

142 Notes by Ellis on the drafting of *Truant Surgeon*, 16 February 1963, Ulrich Ellis papers, NLA, MS 821.

143 John Latham, 'Sir Earle Page: *Truant Surgeon*', *Quadrant*, vol. 7, no. 4, Spring 1963, p. 85.

144 Advice from Page's granddaughter Helen Snyders indicates that the main text of this no longer exists; fragments survive in the EPP, folders 2776, 2777, 2778 and 2785.

with a background of over half a century's study, I am convinced that the simple remedy is at hand – one that has been applied in handling other major Australian problems, such as finance, marketing and roads – through a partnership of Federal, state and local authorities. In such a partnership, the Federal government, as the sole income-tax collector, should provide the capital for the headworks free of interest and redemption, the state government the water channels, and the local authorities, which in each case would be the local river basin authority, should advise and assist the water user on the spot.¹⁴⁵

He quoted here his speech of 9 March 1961 to the House proclaiming the development of water resources to be 'the most important point of all', which should harness 'all the large rivers from the north to the south'. Finally, Page said of the Clarence 'I first became interested in this scheme forty years ago, and I want to see the work completed before I die'.¹⁴⁶

He never did. In June 1961 Page hinted heavily to Ellis that he may well not return from the trip he was about to undertake to the United States. Four months later, feeling ill, he left early from a new state convention in Grafton.¹⁴⁷ Page succumbed to bowel cancer at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney – where he had been a young doctor at the start of the century – on 20 December 1961, at the age of 81 years and four months. Among the official mourners at St Andrew's Cathedral in Sydney two days later were Michael Bruxner, John McEwen and Gough Whitlam, and former prime ministers Arthur Fadden and Frank Forde. Robert Menzies was absent.

On the day of Page's death the result for Cowper in the federal election of 9 December was declared. The seat that he had held since 1919 returned a Labor member for the first time. Page had been an eminently successful local member who won 16 elections in succession. His achievements for his electors most visibly included the long-sought bridge over the Clarence. Most recently he had bombarded the postmaster-general with letters on extending television to northern New South Wales, entirely undeterred by increasingly terse replies.¹⁴⁸ (Page's *Daily Examiner* was keen on setting up a television company.) Only twice did his primary vote in Cowper

145 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 384.

146 *Ibid.*, p. 442.

147 Notes by Ellis on the drafting of *Truant Surgeon*, NLA, MS 821.

148 See correspondence in EPP, folders 2129 and 2132.

fall below 50 per cent, in 1943 when the ALP recorded its greatest ever national election victory, and now in 1961 when the government lost 15 seats in the wake of the credit squeeze. Page had earlier considered retirement from parliament should Ellis, one of the few people he trusted to uphold his national vision, succeed him in Cowper.¹⁴⁹ Once cancer had taken a grip Page could no longer campaign. His primary vote in 1961 fell by a massive 15 per cent from that recorded at the 1958 election, well above the overall swing against the government. Menzies privately blamed the loss of Cowper on Page's refusal to retire.¹⁵⁰

Page's obituary in the *Medical Journal of Australia* praised his 'invincible optimism': 'Page never grew old', was a great reader and possessed an 'orderly mind' that made him precise in thought and action.¹⁵¹ In the parliamentary tributes, McEwen recognised that Page 'was responsible for many monumental changes in the Australian political structure', while Arthur Calwell recalled his 'missionary's zeal'.¹⁵² One newspaper obituary entitled 'Elder Statesman Colourful Figure', noted Page's consistent world view and 'leadership in the development of a new form of co-operative federation', with the Loan Council, the AAC and tied road grants his main achievements.¹⁵³

It was his great confidant David Drummond who showed the most empathy with Page's life and vision. To Drummond, Page's 'outstanding characteristic was a wide and far-seeing vision', which put him 'far ahead of any other man in his own party or in most other political parties'. He recalled Page's commitment to constitutional reform and the harnessing of water power, and his role as 'the real driving force' in the early new states movement. All of this made him 'a realistic dreamer' with 'a vision and a practical idea of how to carry it into effect'. Drummond accurately told parliament that what Page had recently said before the Joint Committee on Constitutional Review was 'really expressive in very large measure, of the ideas that he had promulgated 30 or more years before'.¹⁵⁴

149 Notes by Ellis on the drafting of *Truant Surgeon*, NLA, MS 821.

150 Heather Henderson (ed.), *Letters to My Daughter: Robert Menzies, Letters 1955-75*, Pier 9, Millers Point, 2011, letter Menzies to Henderson of 17 December 1961, p. 78.

151 Bell et al., obituary of Sir Earle Page.

152 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 20 February 1962, pp. 15, 16.

153 *Canberra Times*, 21 December 1961, pp. 5, 10.

154 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 20 February 1962, pp. 18, 19.

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