

PROLOGUE

‘How Many Germans Did You Kill, Doc?’

Late on the morning of 20 April 1939, Earle Page – surgeon, grazier, newspaper proprietor, treasurer and prime minister – delivered the most notorious speech ever heard in the parliament of Australia. His carefully worded but scandalously bitter attack on the personal fitness of Robert Menzies to serve as prime minister not only earned Page outraged condemnation at the time, but also has grossly distorted perceptions of him ever since.

This is despite Page having been the most remarkable visionary to hold political power in Australia. His determined efforts to realise the nation’s economic potential by recasting it as a decentralised, regionalised and rationally planned society have never been laid out with proper justice to the richness of this vision. He was effervescent, intelligent and persistent. The main constraint on the man was his own tendency to overestimate how eminently practical his plans surely were.

Page was himself prime minister when he launched his attack on Menzies. He had been sworn in 13 days before on a caretaker basis following the death in office of Joseph Lyons from heart failure. The much-loved Lyons had led the United Australia Party (UAP), the senior partner in a governing coalition with the Country Party of which Page had himself been federal parliamentary leader since 1921. The choice of Page to step into the prime ministership was aided by the UAP’s lack of a deputy leader when Lyons died. This was as Menzies – comparatively young, determined and prone to an arrogance that extended to indiscreetly imitating Page’s mannerisms – had recently resigned as Lyons’s deputy over the government’s about-face on implementing a national insurance scheme. As war seemed an imminent possibility, Page was sworn in with the full powers of the prime

ministership. He accepted his commission from the governor-general with the intention of resigning once the UAP had elected a new leader, and of not serving as a member of a coalition government should Menzies be chosen. Eleven days later, the UAP party room did just that.

Since 1934 Page had sat in the Cabinet alongside Menzies, and even accompanied him on trade delegations to Britain in 1936 and 1938. Page's parliamentary attack on his erstwhile ministerial colleague was made all the more dramatic by the lack of public warning. It had just become known that the Country Party would not serve under Menzies, due foremost to his insistence on choosing all members of a coalition ministry including those from the Country Party. And it was widely appreciated that his personal relations with Page were decidedly poor. But to publicly condemn Menzies on the grounds that he had not volunteered for the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) during the Great War – to effectively brand him an abject coward – went far beyond anything previously heard in the parliament.

That Page was clearly not just speaking intemperately in a sudden flare of anger added to the sense of outrage. His very precise and ordered speech had obviously been carefully crafted. Page's future daughter-in-law later recalled repeatedly typing drafts of the speech with and then without the offending passage as he uncharacteristically vacillated. Only his wife and a select few parliamentary colleagues were taken into his confidence. Page's current and former deputies Harold Thorby and Tom Paterson both tried in vain to dissuade him. His political secretary, Massey Stanley, took it upon himself to neuter his boss's intended text: Page tore the result into shreds with a chuckle.

Accounts vary as to whether the acerbic Archie Cameron, later to succeed Page as Country Party leader, also counselled caution or instead provided the fatal encouragement to go ahead: the latter would have been much more in character. The day before the attack, Page drove into the Brindabella Range outside Canberra with Cameron and Ulrich Ruegg Ellis. Ellis was an acute observer of federal politics who had known Page since 1921 and served as his political secretary 1928–36. Page did not embark on this trip so as to let himself be dissuaded. On the contrary, he was seeking to calm his nerves for what he was about to do. He felt confident that he could end Menzies's political career, if not at once at least eventually. Page had convinced himself that he could match his effort

of 1923 when he had made the replacement of Prime Minister William Morris 'Billy' Hughes by Stanley Bruce a condition of the Country Party's preparedness to join a coalition with the urban-based conservatives.

Page began the parliamentary day of 20 April conventionally enough. A distant predecessor of his as member for the north-eastern New South Wales seat of Cowper, one Francis Clarke, had just died. This aroused little interest other than a noting of Clarke's having surrendered a seat he earlier held in the New South Wales Parliament so that Edmund Barton could resume his status as an MP and thus his formal role in the Federation movement. Opposition leader John Curtin and then Menzies briefly added to Page's words of condolence. Following a few further formalities, Page began to deliver his prepared statement.

Page did not launch into the attack at once. His very deliberate choice of words slowly built a sense of tension as it became increasingly clear that he was working towards something momentous. Page spoke of Menzies having personally advised him that he had just become UAP leader, to which Page's very proper response had been an assurance that he would vacate the prime ministership whenever this suited. But Page still felt 'compelled to take up the question as to who was to be the new leader of the UAP', especially as there was a need for someone with the right public record to 'lead a united national effort' and 'inspire the people of Australia'.¹

Page's penchant for demonstrative cleverness was reflected in how he structured the progression of his speech. Twenty-four days ago, said Page, Menzies had resigned from Lyons's Cabinet over the national insurance scheme issue. Twenty-four weeks ago, he had made a speech on leadership to the Constitutional Club in Sydney, widely interpreted as a veiled attack on Prime Minister Lyons. And then, the climax. In Page's words:

When, 24 years ago, Australia was in the midst of the Gallipoli campaign, Mr Menzies was a member of the Australian Military Forces, and held the King's Commission. In 1915, after being in the service for some years, he resigned his commission and did not go overseas. I am not questioning the reasons why anyone did not go to the war. All I say is that if the right honourable gentleman cannot satisfactorily and publicly explain to a very

1 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 April 1939, p. 12.

great body of people in Australia who did participate in the war his failure to do so, he will not be able to get that maximum effort out of the people in the event of war.²

In other words, Menzies was of such poor character he was not fit to succeed to the prime ministership. Page had raised the great unmentionable of who had and had not volunteered for active service. Whispers about this had long dogged Menzies. It was why he had not been invited to join the Melbourne Club: when the offer was finally made after he became prime minister, he appears to have elected to quietly decline. Page spoke also of his attempt to entice Stanley Bruce back from the Australian High Commission in London to again become prime minister. Given the seeming likelihood of war, Page was convinced that Bruce should head a national government of all parties and contrasted this with the one-party government that Menzies seemed set to lead.

Page's accusation had an immediate impact, but hardly of the sort he had hoped for. There were at once 'wild scenes' in the House, with 'uproar and cries of "shame"' reported the *Sydney Morning Herald*.³ The MP for Hunter, Rowley James, was one of the few to make himself clear to the Hansard reporters with his cry of "That is dirt!"⁴ (Verbatim newspaper reports captured a fuller record than did Hansard, including slightly blunter choices of words by both Page and Menzies.) Other members loudly affirmed that they had not gone to the war either, providing history with the unique sight of Labor members shouting in defence of Robert Menzies. Yet Page was deterred neither by the tumult nor by snide references to his own brief war service as an army doctor. The Opposition's Joe Gander pointedly inquired 'How many Germans did you kill, Doc?'⁵

Menzies himself tried to interject but was drowned out. His wife Pattie, sitting in the public gallery, left at once and henceforth never spoke to Page again. Immediately after Page concluded, Menzies rose to deliver his rejoinder. That his right arm was in a dark sling unintentionally added to his innately considerable gravitas – even if, far from being a war wound, it was the result of a fall on a Canberra footpath on the very morning of the UAP party room vote two days earlier.

2 Ibid., p. 12.

3 Ibid., p. 12.

4 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 20 April 1939, p. 16.

5 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 April 1939, p. 12.

Speaking off the cuff, Menzies said ambiguously that he had ‘received whispers’ about why the Country Party would not join with him in government. He then proceeded to answer Page’s case against him point by point. His resignation from Cabinet over national insurance was in keeping with a pledge to his electors and so was in fact ‘one of the more respectable actions of my life’. The speech to the Constitutional Club had merely been an affirmation that ‘the success of democracy would depend upon leadership and loyalty to leadership’.⁶

As for the attack on his personal integrity, this was ‘not novel’. It was part of the ‘stream of mud through which I have waded at every election campaign’. Menzies had not resigned anything, but had served out his period of compulsory training like any other universal trainee, which extended – though he did not make this clear in the speech – right through the war and up to 1921. His not joining the AIF arose from ‘a man’s intimate and personal family affairs’. Mention of two of his brothers having enlisted made it implicitly clear that he had been constrained by a binding family decision that he was the one to stay at home. Specifying that they had served in the infantry may have been a jab at Page not having been a frontline soldier himself. Menzies concluded, according to the press accounts, that as prime minister he would ‘exhibit none of those miserable paltry traits’ shown by Page ‘in the most remarkable attack I have heard in my public career’.⁷

It was immediately obvious that Page had made a massive miscalculation. The next day the *Sydney Morning Herald* denounced his ‘despicable attack’ as ‘a violation of the decencies of debate without parallel in the annals of the Federal Parliament’.⁸ The Melbourne *Argus* thought that Page ‘emerges with a stain on his record which would seem to be permanent’.⁹ Page’s political standing was severely damaged: five months later he finally resigned as leader of the Country Party. Despite a rather nominal reconciliation with Menzies in October of the following year, Page never directly apologised or disowned his infamous speech. Nor was it quite the last parliamentary airing of Menzies’s lack of a war record. Sixteen years later, amidst a debate on the Petrov Royal Commission, the Labor member Dan Curtin demanded of Menzies ‘what about your

6 Ibid., p. 12.

7 Ibid., p. 12.

8 Ibid., p. 10.

9 Melbourne *Argus*, 21 April 1939, p. 10.

military record?' Menzies retorted with a tart suggestion to instead 'ask Bert and Eddie', a reference to the Labor leader Herbert Vere Evatt and his colleague Eddie Ward having also spent the war at home.¹⁰

Page was not normally vindictive. So why this extraordinary transgression of an unspoken parliamentary taboo? The immediate trigger was his angry conviction that Menzies's attacks on Lyons – if such they were – had imposed stress that hastened Lyons's death. But Page's outrage also had a more substantive policy base in the recent failure of his attempt to create a powerful national economic planning agency. Menzies had made clear to Page his disdain for this audacious venture. Like almost everything that Page did, his actions of 20 April 1939 drew on his determination to engineer a very different Australia.

10 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 25 October 1955, p. 2.

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