7

POST-WAR PAGE

Hopes amidst Frustrations

The domestic political outcomes of World War Two should have suited Page. The war fostered a planning-oriented culture that ‘gave life to the argument promoted by inter-war new liberals that expert knowledge should determine resource allocation and social order’.¹ It also accelerated the centralisation of governmental power, foremost by the transfer of state income taxes to the Commonwealth. H.C. Coombs, director-general of post-war reconstruction, wrote in 1944 of the ‘opportunity to move consciously and intelligently towards a new economic and social system’, entirely unlike that of the Depression years.²

During the war, political attention began to return to developmentalism, making it central to post-war reconstruction. Many of the ideas for which Page had been the pre-eminent national advocate for over two decades finally entered the political mainstream, including regionalism, decentralisation and hydroelectricity. His wartime service in London and participation in the 1942 Constitutional Convention heightened his sense of entitlement to a major say in the policy priorities of the anticipated post-war era, reinforced by a conviction that wartime had made his policy prescriptions more acceptable to the general public.

1 Walter, *What Were They Thinking?*, p. 176.

2 Quoted in Stuart Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment: War and Reconstruction in the 1940s*, NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, 2015, p. 6.

But the changed political and policy-making precepts of this intellectually exciting period posed major new challenges for Page, and provide a sharp contrast to his political peak of the inter-war years. Much post-war policy thinking had troubling implications for such favoured fields of his as cooperative federalism. The economy was developing in directions that he found worrying: mechanisation reduced rural employment and the wartime boost to manufacturing combined with a housing backlog pushed public spending towards the cities. Above all, Page faced the paradox of his favoured policy themes being elevated to national policy amid a new technocratic and expert-oriented environment that he found unfamiliar and sometimes hostile. He responded to exclusion from official processes and dwindling personal power within his own party by personally lobbying governments and the media. His championing of the Clarence in preference to the Snowy Mountains Scheme provides a study of how he now found himself operating.

Page's post-war expectations: The wartime setting

Page foresaw the looming post-war era as a rare opportunity. He attached great importance to taking full advantage of public tolerance of wartime measures as a basis for developmentalist initiatives. Despite being out of ministerial office from October 1941, the war years presented Page with two unexpected opportunities to pursue major elements of his policy agenda. These raised his hopes, but someone more self-aware might have seen them as signs of the difficulties he would face in trying to work with a post-war Labor Government.

The first opportunity arose courtesy of the short-lived government of Arthur Fadden. Following the resignation of the embattled Robert Menzies late in August 1941, Fadden was elevated to the prime ministership at a joint meeting of UAP and Country Party parliamentarians. This was evidently in the hope that he could repeat the relative harmony associated with his acting as prime minister during Menzies's recent absence overseas. In September, Page was appointed Australian minister resident in London, the outcome of four months of debate about Australian representation in the British War Cabinet. Menzies had earlier proposed representation at prime ministerial level, but his own and Fadden's Cabinet preferred a minister of less exalted rank.

Page received detailed written instructions from the new prime minister. These made it pointedly clear that he was expected to curb his anticipated enthusiasms and act primarily as an agent of his home government. His fundamental role in 'matters that require special consultation with the Government of the United Kingdom' were to be 'the strategic situation, with special reference to the Middle East' and 'Empire Defence and Foreign Policy, with special reference to the Far East'. En route to London he was to stop over in Singapore so as to familiarise himself with defence plans for 'Far Eastern Defence' and 'the Pacific situation', thereby acquiring 'the necessary background for your London discussions'. But with respect to 'operational plans' being developed, he should appreciate that 'there is no question of their review by you with the authorities at Singapore'. Upon reaching London, he was to be aware that 'Mr Menzies ... during his visit covered all the major questions then outstanding which the Services desired to be discussed with the United Kingdom Government'. He would be advised at a pre-departure briefing with the three chiefs of staff 'whether any other matters have since arisen on which your assistance is required'. If any such questions of importance did arise in London, wrote Fadden, they 'should, of course, be submitted to me in order that the Ministers of the Departments concerned and, if necessary, the War Cabinet may be consulted, and the necessary directions prepared for your guidance'.³

Despite these instructions, Page at large in a world at war felt free to engage in his own very personal brand of diplomacy, as was typical of his vigorous pursuit of his own agenda in almost any circumstances. He was determined to uphold his own interpretation of the national interest, including a vision of international decision-making machinery reminiscent of his planning-based vision for the Australian economy. Page remained a steadfastly unconventional diplomat who produced long and didactic cables for Canberra's benefit as he pressed for an Australian say in British policy, the allocation of Allied resources to the Pacific region and the supply of Australian food and other commodities. His ebullience was to lead him into major difficulties, with implications both for his standing with his home government and his later historical reputation. Page kept a detailed diary of this wartime mission – a rich source not just on Page but also on wartime international relations more broadly. It provides a continuous narrative from Page's departure from Australia

3 Arthur Fadden to Page, 'Visit of Australian Minister to London', 16 September 1941, NAA, A5954, 475/1.

by seaplane in September 1941 to his August 1942 return, with addenda concerning a discussion with Douglas MacArthur in October 1942, the Constitutional Convention of November–December 1942 and a War Council meeting of 8 December 1942.⁴

Page was quick to signal his assumption that his on-the-spot status earned him a major say in Australian foreign and defence policy. Even when still in Singapore in early October he wrote to Prime Minister Fadden proposing a conference of the Australian Cabinet with regional Allied leaders including the British governor of the Straits Settlements, Shenton Thomas, the British minister resident there, Duff Cooper, and the governor-general of the Netherlands East Indies. Page was confident that 'the publicity given to such a conference and the statements made by the different visitors would be the best propaganda that we could have if we have to fight Japan, to enable the people to understand its inevitability'.⁵ But the secretary of the Department of Defence, Frederick Shedden, curtly declared it 'dangerous to cut across the machinery or procedure that has up to the present been employed'.⁶

The Fadden Government was defeated on the floor of the House on 3 October 1941 while Page was still on his way to London. Its Labor successor led by John Curtin indicted that he should continue. This ultimately was to prove unfortunate for Page. It is evident from Page's diary that Prime Minister Churchill initially gave him a considerable amount of his time. By December Page had secured a position on British War Cabinet committees. In early 1942 he helped to establish the Pacific War Council, intended to advise on Allied operations in the Pacific theatre but which in practice did not become part of the chain of command as Page had hoped. Japan's sudden entry into the war dramatically increased tensions between London and Canberra over the defence of Singapore, and the simultaneous transformation of the United States into a full combatant greatly diminished Australia's relative importance as a British ally. Also woven into Page's day-by-day account is his continuing resentment of Robert Menzies, such as by recording gossip shared by Keith Murdoch that in losing the prime ministership Menzies had 'made some vicious speeches on his own people and seemed terribly sour'.⁷

4 Page's wartime diary is preserved in typed form at EPP, folder 2787 (part 2).

5 Page to Fadden, 2 October 1941, NAA, A5954, 475/1.

6 Shedden to Curtin, 'Sir Earle Page's Proposal for a Conference in Regard to Far Eastern Questions', 22 October 1941, NAA, A5954, 475/1.

7 Page's wartime diary, EPP, folder 2787 (part 3), entry for 21 November 1941.

Page, along with Stanley Bruce as high commissioner, bore the immediate brunt of Churchill's ire over the Australian criticism of strategy for the defence of Singapore, especially the notorious accusation that evacuation of the island would amount to an 'inexcusable betrayal'. As Page wrote in his memoirs, Churchill was 'human and there were times, with tempers frayed and nerves strained to breaking point, when electric passages-at-arms were staged around the War Cabinet table'.⁸ Page's long diary entry on the War Cabinet meeting of 26 January 1942 records that 'Ch. [Churchill] then went off the deep end about the Austns. generally, and said if they were going to squeal he would send them all home again out of the various fighting zones'. This drew a long and firm riposte from Page that the Australian troops 'wanted to stay where the fighting was', and that far from looking out just for itself, Australia 'had been looking after the Empire all the time'.⁹

Page's personal standing with the Australian Government was seriously damaged by a major clash with both Curtin and his external affairs minister Herbert Evatt over the return of the Second AIF from the Middle East. This foremost instance of Page's readiness to conduct himself more as active player than loyal diplomat has been much publicised. He is usually strongly criticised; along with the April 1939 attack on Menzies, it has been recounted at length in histories and has distorted wider impressions of Page ever since.¹⁰

Essentially, in February 1942, Page deliberately hesitated in implementing through Churchill Australian Government instructions that elements of the 7th Division of the AIF, then at sea headed for the Netherlands East Indies (but eventually sent on to Australia) not be diverted to Rangoon at British behest in an attempt to save Burma from the Japanese. Although one of Curtin's instructing cables contained a short passage that could have been seen as signalling some openness to the diversion, in the whole Canberra's instructions were clear. Page's actions were not the result of his failing to master what the Australian authorities wanted, as John Dedman, Curtin's minister for war organisation of industry, later asserted.¹¹ Page in

8 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 325.

9 Page's wartime diary, EPP, folder 2787 (part 3), entry for 26 January 1942.

10 Such as in Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1942–1945*, series 4 (Civil), volume 2, *Australia in the War of 1939–1945*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1970, pp. 73–87; and David Horner, 'Australia and Allied Strategy in the Pacific, 1941–1946', PhD thesis, The Australian National University, 1980, pp. 87–104.

11 John Dedman, 'The return of the AIF from the Middle East', *Australian Outlook*, vol. 21, no. 2, August 1967, p. 163.

fact agreed with the British assessment that it was important to try to save Burma so as to protect British India and maintain a land supply route that would help keep China in the war. He vigorously argued this case throughout this rare occasion when Australia found itself at the centre of Allied grand strategy by virtue of some of its troops happening to be in a strategic place at a critical time.

Page therefore mediated exchanges between Curtin and Churchill so as to leave open the possibility that the Australian Government would accede to British wishes. He did so until he was absolutely satisfied that the Australian Government was fully aware of the case for Burma, despite earlier indications that it was unlikely to shift its position. Page was overconfident that Curtin would reconsider and was 'staggered' when the Australian prime minister continued to insist that the troops should not go to Rangoon. At the same time, he discovered that a cable from the British commander in the Far East, Archibald Wavell, that presented the full case for Burma had not yet been sent to Canberra, with the result that he 'roared everybody up' to get the cable sent at once.¹² Page therefore delayed passing Curtin's reaffirmation on to Churchill as he thought that it had not been prepared in full knowledge of the considered British view. He told Curtin that he was thoughtfully 'holding your telegram secret till receipt further advice' and assured him that 'no instructions to divert its course from proceeding to Australia had been sent to the convoy'.¹³ Far from not understanding the issues at stake, Page 'had [a] personal talk with Ch. [Churchill] and told him if he could give me certain assurances re [the] position in Burma I thought I could get their consent'. These were that in Burma the Australians 'would have a definite chance to retrieve the position completely'; second, 'that they could be got into Rangoon in reasonable safety'; and, finally, that if Rangoon fell 'they could be supplied if they fell back and operated in conjunction with [the] Chinese'.¹⁴ This was all in Page's full knowledge that his youngest son, Douglas, was in the convoy being considered for Burma.

Page's understanding that the convoy had not yet been diverted proved empty when a few days later Churchill advised that he had discretely ordered it north towards Rangoon in anticipation of agreement from the Australians, probably influenced by Page's personal advice. Page was

12 Page's wartime diary, EPP, folder 2787 (part 3), entry for 18 February 1942.

13 Page to Curtin, 19 February 1942, *Historical Documents, Volume 5: 1941, July – 1942, June*, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), 347 Cablegram P47 [NAA, A816, 52/302/142].

14 Page's wartime diary, EPP, folder 2787 (part 3), entry for 19 February 1942.

in good company in advocating the British position, including that of Stanley Bruce, President Roosevelt and the Opposition in the Australian parliament. But it remains that subsequent assessments of his actions are greatly coloured by a consensus that Australian troops landed in Rangoon would probably have shared the fate of their 8th Division comrades by becoming prisoners of the Japanese.¹⁵

Curtin concluded his debate over Burma with Page with an angry cable admonishing him that 'we were amazed to learn' that he had hesitated to send on advice that the troopships were not to be diverted. 'I cannot fail to point out to you that your cablegrams give no impression that the Australian point of view regarding the security of the Commonwealth as the ultimate base to be held in the south-west Pacific has been advocated by you' thundered the prime minister.¹⁶ Page cabled back in typically verbose but hurt terms, declaring that 'my own personal and family record establishe[s] beyond question that the security of Australia has always been my first consideration' and reiterating the case for Burma. He added that he had devoted much thought 'to the establishment of cordial automatically working machinery of consultation on all planes between Australia and Britain', because 'in the scramble for priority' for receiving British armaments and technology 'maximum goodwill and [the] feeling that there will always be the utmost co-operation are tremendous assets'.¹⁷ The tone is that he saw himself as an equal of Prime Minister Curtin.

Page in wartime retained a strong attachment to the possibilities of the imperial connection. This was despite steadily rising bilateral tension between Britain and Australia as their respective strategic and economic interests continued to diverge. Differences grew from the late 1930s over such issues as conservation of foreign exchange, expansion of Australian manufacturing at the expense of British exports and, prior to December 1941, whether to deter or seek compromise with Japan.¹⁸ Page had long seen the Empire not just as a vehicle for Australian trade policy but also for the management of international trade, including 'Empire rationalisation'.

15 See for example Judith Marsh, 'Churchill versus Curtin, February 1942,' *Army Journal*, no. 260, January 1971, pp. 27–34.

16 Curtin to Page, cable, 25 February 1942, *Historical Documents, Volume 5*, DFAT, 374 Cablegram 33 [NAA, A3196, 1942, 0.5738].

17 Page to Curtin, 27 February 1942, *Historical Documents, Volume 5*, DFAT, 378 Cablegram P54 [NAA, A3195, 1942, 1.8581].

18 Kosmas Tsokhas, 'Dedominionization: The Anglo-Australian experience, 1939–1945', *The Historical Journal*, vol. 37, no. 4, December 1994, pp. 861–83.

In May 1936, for example, he had drafted an article for the *Farmers Weekly* proposing to organise Australia's trade in primary products via producer-controlled but government-backed national boards that would work with similar Empire boards for each product. Together, these would set production quotas, influence prices and manage imports from outside the Empire.¹⁹ At the 1937 Imperial Conference he had mooted an empire agricultural council. Use of the Empire to manage international trade had numerous other eminent pre-war advocates such as Lionel Curtis, the Anglo-Canadian media baron Lord Beaverbrook and the then London-based Australian historian W.K. Hancock.

In London, Page's vision encompassed harnessing the Empire to manage the wartime and post-war production and pricing of major traded commodities and of manufactures such as steel. Early in 1942, Churchill and Roosevelt created joint Anglo-American boards to integrate Allied production and supply: Page wanted to balance these with machinery for the Empire management of supplies that also gave the Dominions a say. Reminiscent of his earlier ideas for planning the Australian economy, he set out in his memoirs a rationally organised pantheon of planning mechanisms ascending from the technical and departmental levels up to an empire supply or production board of British ministers and high commissioners with final authority to coordinate production across the Empire. Ideally, it would be headed by Beaverbrook.²⁰

Page feared that growing ties with the United States posed a long-term threat to Empire integrity. He warned Curtin that although Australia had a strong relationship with Britain, 'it would be many years, if ever, before there was the same mutual sympathy, knowledge, understanding and common interest between the great masses of the people of Australia and America as between those of Britain and Australia'. Hence 'we should mobilise the support of the whole British Empire to bring maximum pressure on [the] United States to assure the fullest consideration and quickest attention to our military problems and needs'. A way to help achieve this, added Page, was 'the full functioning of the Empire clearing houses of the various supply organisations for munitions, raw materials and shipping brought into being by Roosevelt's and Churchill's agreement and the establishment of an Empire Production Council'.²¹

19 See EPP, folder 1802.

20 Page, *Truant Surgeon*, pp. 350–2, 356–7.

21 Page to Curtin, 13 March 1942, *Historical Documents, Volume 5*, DFAT, 410 Cablegram P66 [NAA, A3195, 1942, 1.10485].

Page's efforts to organise wartime production and supply had an additional agenda of extending these arrangements into peacetime to help stabilise world trade, as well as reinvigorate the Empire. He used his wartime travels to promote this extraordinarily ambitious yet ill-defined vision with an assortment of well-placed figures that included British civil servants, New York financiers and Oxford dons. In Washington en route to London he discussed with Vice-President Henry Wallace, even before the United States had entered the war, 'post-war reconstruction based on international collaboration with regard to surpluses of both primary and secondary industries'.²² In London in November 1941 he raised with Bruce his ideas on how production surpluses could be used in an 'international way with a definite policy of restoring world trade and especially lifting the nutrition of the peoples of the world'. He was confident of securing Churchill's support and foresaw that his idea 'could be worked out by the industries themselves and not necessarily by the Governments'.²³ Publicly, he spoke of how 'the methods of co-ordination that are adopted for wartime action should be such as can be used for peacetime purposes and post-war planning', and 'not just vanish into thin air as they did after the last war'.²⁴ Soon after, as Singapore was about to fall to the Japanese, he spoke at All Souls College, Oxford, on the coordination of wartime supplies and the 'rationalisation of industry' between the Empire and other Allied countries through 'continuous and permanent machinery I have outlined for England & Australia'. Such machinery would at war's end 'overcome fierce competition that will bring trade dislocation and depressions'.²⁵

Page echoed much of what he had said to the New South Wales Chamber of Manufactures in 1926 by now telling the British minister of labour, Ernest Bevin, of his hopes for a Commonwealth council of agriculture that would exceed the work of the Empire Marketing Board of 1926–33 by 'assuring production, distribution and marketing of our Empire goods in an orderly fashion'. The result would be that 'stabilisation of prices for agricultural products would tend to give such stability to industry and employment as to make industrial problems much smaller and easier to

22 Page's wartime diary, EPP, folder 2787 (part 3), entry for 19 October 1941.

23 Ibid., entry for 17 November 1941.

24 'Speech by Sir Earle Page at Second Wednesday Club, London, 7th January 1942', EPP, folder 1902 (part 2).

25 See EPP, folder 1819, for a summary outline of this 31 January 1942 speech; also Page's wartime diary, entry for 31 January 1942, including 'Note of Discussion at Balliol College, 31.1.42', EPP, folder 2787 (part 3).

handle'.²⁶ Speaking to the Empire Parliamentary Association in January 1942, he spoke of 'a review of the production capacity of each Dominion', an Empire-wide 'determination of sites and location of different industries' and even the planned industrialisation of India that would create post-war markets for Britain and Australia.²⁷ There are signs here, perhaps, of the reasons for the exasperated, and essentially unfair, comment from the chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Alan Brooke, that Page had in the War Cabinet displayed 'the mentality of a greengrocer'.²⁸

The emphasis on global rationalisation, organisation and planning makes all this less a typical Australian conception of Empire than a distinctively Page view. He wrote in his diary of sending plans to Curtin, 'the symmetry of which was perfect and which would provide an insoluble bond of unity between Empire for good'. Page was then also preparing a statement on Empire production and supply, but feared 'that they may be so stupid as not to be able to understand without the actual practical operation of the system that I have had, how indispensable this system is and how permanent and indissoluble it will make the union'.²⁹ Page even mused about a federal union of the Empire and the United States.³⁰

Page's efforts far exceeded his personal influence and were contrary to the reality of a British Empire facing decline as the United States seemed increasingly likely to assume leadership of the post-war world. The policy and political opportunities of the 1940s were in many respects very different from those of the 1930s. The Australian Government's interest in international discussions concerning institutional arrangements for the post-war world economy shifted towards maintaining full employment. Although these various discussions did include trade in primary products, notably at the May 1943 Hot Springs Conference in the United States, their overall emphasis was on free trade and international financial stability rather than the production and price controls that attracted Page.³¹ There is no more striking instance of the extent of Page's policy ambitions and willingness to pursue these whenever an opportunity presented itself.

26 Page's wartime diary, *ibid.*, entry for 25 June 1942.

27 Earle Page, *Improvement of Empire Communications and Methods of Consultation*, Empire Parliamentary Association, London, 1942, pp. 11–12, 13–14, copy at EPP, folder 642.

28 Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, *War Diaries 1939–1945*, edited by Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 2001, p. 212.

29 Page's wartime diary, EPP, folder 2787 (part 3), entry for 28 January 1942.

30 'Note of Discussion at Balliol College', EPP, folder 2787 (part 3).

31 See Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, pp. 241–53.

Page retained faith in the potential of the Empire, writing in his memoirs that had it 'developed the same common feeling as the United States' it would have remained a force for trade and international stability, a 'Commonwealth market' that the rest of world have wished to join.³²

The events of the first few months of 1942 placed Page under great stress, resulting in a rare dampening of his otherwise incorrigible optimism. Late in March 1942 he came down with a near-fatal bout of 'double broncho-pneumonia'. Formally diagnosed on 28 March, his diary entry covering the next two days reads simply 'unconscious'. In a personal letter written as he recovered in hospital, Page told Curtin that 'I went through since January the worst period of acute mental distress of my whole life'. He looked forward to returning to Australia where 'I may be of real value to you in bringing to you a first-hand knowledge of their way of looking at things over here and the personal attitude of each man that counts'.³³ This is all a fine example not merely of Page's habitual conviction that he was the bearer of special knowledge but also his ultimate dedication to upholding what he perceived as the national interest.

Page departed Britain by air on 26 June 1942 to commence an extended return journey via the United States where he visited the Tennessee Valley Authority and met with President Roosevelt. As they flew into New York, he advised his fellow passenger the British Treasury adviser Frederick Leith-Ross 'not to form a general organisation to deal with the whole matter [of post-war reconstruction] but to take each major item by itself and have an executive organisation of the countries most interested in that subject to deal with it'.³⁴ In Washington, he prepared a press statement adding that 'pool controls' set up by Allied governments jointly to control production should be used after the war to 'automatically plan to meet the problems of peace', with 'international collaboration proceeding item by item'.³⁵ The President told Page that once Germany was defeated 'the surrender of Japan would follow almost immediately', which Page contested 'on the grounds of their fanaticism, the resources at their disposal, and of the difficulties of smashing them to bits'. He asked Page to take a message

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

33 Page to Curtin, 24 April 1942, NAA, A5954, 475/2.

34 Page's wartime diary, EPP, folder 2787 (part 3), entry for 28 June 1942.

35 'Statement by Sir Earle Page at Press Conference at Washington D.C. July 10th, 1942', EPP, folder 1902 (part 2).

to Curtin requesting that he visit.³⁶ In New York, the vice-president of General Electric, William Herod, recalled that Page had in 1936 'put up the proposal of a co-operative international electrical enterprise in Europe as the most certain way to prevent war'.³⁷

Page was to remain defensive about his London experience, claiming to have helped contain the damage to bilateral relations. He never in hindsight conceded that he had been wrong about the Burma controversy. Later he wrote of his efforts to persuade Churchill and Curtin to moderate their dispute, with Churchill agreeing that Page could vet all his future cables to the Australians and the King personally honouring him for avoiding a split in the Empire by making him a Companion of Honour.³⁸ But the harm to his relations with the Labor Government almost certainly had implications for his hopes of a direct role in post-war reconstruction.

When Page returned to Australia in August 1942, he was greeted in Sydney by the prime minister who invited him to 'make up my mind what I would like to do'.³⁹ He resumed his place in a parliamentary Country Party still led by Arthur Fadden (also Opposition leader). Page remained undeterred by his decidedly mixed experiences overseas and at once sought a major say in guiding post-war reconstruction. He reported to parliament that in London he had been 'intimately associated' with 'the system of inter-governmental contacts' and was even 'largely instrumental in creating the Empire machinery associated with it'. On this basis, Page considered that he 'could be of use not only in the consideration of current problems, but also in planning for the post-war period, so that Australia shall be able to take its proper place in the affairs of the world'.⁴⁰ Although Page overstated his influence in London, he was nonetheless one of the few Australians to have operated at high levels in Allied capitals, and had a long-standing claim to expertise in prospective post-war issues of regionalism, planning and infrastructure.

36 Page's wartime diary, EPP, folder 2787 (part 3), entry for 21 July 1942.

37 Ibid., entry for 13 July 1942.

38 See note in EPP, folder 2577; also Page, *Truant Surgeon*, p. 365.

39 Page's wartime diary, EPP, folder 2787 (part 3), entry for 16 August 1942.

40 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 9 September 1942, p. 109.

Figure 9: Earle Page with Ethel Page on his return to Australia, August 1942.

Source: Courtesy of Australian War Memorial, 150400, photograph by Harry Turner.

Page's second big wartime opportunity came when the Curtin Government appointed him as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention held in Canberra late in 1942. The government was already looking towards realising its anticipated post-war reconstruction program and gave Evatt (also attorney-general) the task of securing the greater constitutional powers this required. Page still had a largely workable personal relationship with Curtin, but the appointment had more to do with the need for a balanced party representation at the convention than any signal of a substantive post-war role.⁴¹ Yet it both raised his hopes and came to demonstrate the extent to which his views had drifted from those of his immediate political peers.

The convention arose from a Bill introduced into parliament in October 1941 proposing an entirely new section of the Constitution expanding the Commonwealth's powers over industry, employment, health, transport and housing. It would also debar the High Court from interfering with legislation considered necessary for 'economic security and social justice'.⁴²

41 Page's short (one and a half page) 'Diary of Constitutional Convention' notes simply 'I was chosen to represent the Country Party'; EPP, folder 2787 (part 3).

42 Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, pp. 137–8.

Faced with the unlikelihood of such radical alterations getting past the Senate let alone succeeding at a referendum, the Curtin Government resorted to convening a special convention of Commonwealth and state parliamentarians from all parties in the hope of securing broad-based political support. Membership was accordingly wide – eight members of the House of Representatives, four of the Senate, and the premier and the Opposition leader from each state, adding up to a total of 24 delegates evenly divided between the ALP and the non-Labor parties. The extended proceedings that followed were dubbed a Constitutional Convention, but Paul Hasluck, writing later as an official war historian, severely doubted that they deserved such an elevated title.⁴³

Delegates convened in Parliament House, Canberra, from 24 November to 4 December 1942. It was soon clear that a referendum on greater Commonwealth powers lacked bipartisan support. Fadden rightly accused the Curtin Government of trying to insert the Labor Party's platform into the Constitution.⁴⁴ But Page treated the convention as an opportunity to present an ambitious and original policy plan. His main concerns were that the government had both misjudged its strategy and was missing an opportunity to achieve major reform. Unlike other non-Labor delegates, Page was not overly concerned by the dangers of a powerful central government. Instead, he proposed that for development projects 'the Commonwealth should plan and finance and ... the states should administer and construct through their own agencies or through that of their local governments', making them 'the hands and fingers of the planning body'. He evoked past cooperative successes such as tied road grants, the Sydney–Brisbane railway and the Hume Dam on the Murray River. If 'the states could have some voice in the arrangement of the plan and of the general lines of policy, then there could be little objection to ample legal powers being in the hands of the Commonwealth'.⁴⁵ A National Council of the Commonwealth and the states should be appointed with a permanent secretariat 'to see what powers could be best handled co-operatively, which could be best handled by the Commonwealth or by states, and also should look at the changes necessary if any drastic reform of the Constitution in the direction of unification were found to be indispensable'.⁴⁶

43 See Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1942–1945*, pp. 524–8.

44 Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, p. 139.

45 'Sir Earle Page – Constitutional Convention, Canberra, 1/12/42', EPP, folder 888.

46 'Diary of Constitutional Convention', EPP, folder 2787 (part 3).

Page was clearly seeking acceptance as a major contributor to post-war reconstruction. He was undeterred by the partisanship on display during and after the convention, instead indicating his own readiness to work across party lines. Although the convention concluded with delegates unanimously supporting the states using section 51(xxxvii) of the Constitution to voluntarily refer powers to the Commonwealth on a strictly temporary basis, in the event only two Labor states, New South Wales and Queensland, passed the requisite legislation. This resulted in a referendum in August 1944 for the direct acquisition of powers by the Commonwealth for a five-year period after the cessation of hostilities, including over the production and distribution of goods. In parliament, the Country Party initially voted with the government on the referendum legislation but later switched after failing to secure an amendment to strengthen powers over the marketing of commodities.⁴⁷

Page's hopes and fears for post-war reconstruction were as much about means as ends, making him one of the first major public figures to articulate a comprehensive cooperative path to constitutional change. He had long experience of failed referendums thwarting constitutional reform, and saw the nation's wartime exigencies as presenting a chance to alter this pattern. In the parliamentary debate of March 1944 on the forthcoming referendum, he said that experience had convinced him that major reforms 'cannot be rammed down the throats of the states by a referendum', and wryly recalled that the only major referendum carried since Federation was the 1928 enshrinement of the Financial Agreement.⁴⁸ Although he thought that the states accepted much of what the Constitutional Convention and 1944 referendum proposed, Page saw the Commonwealth as courting failure by also proposing more controversial wider powers, such as over prices and company legislation. In other respects the proposed referendum was flawed by seeking merely 'partial and inadequate powers', particularly by omitting Commonwealth control of primary production and failing 'to acquire the whole of the railways of Australia'. If Australia were to compete successfully with countries like the Soviet Union, the United States and Canada, said Page, it must exercise proper national control of communications and energy.⁴⁹

47 Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1942–1945*, pp. 534–5; Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, p. 257.

48 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 8 March 1944, p. 1072.

49 *Ibid.*, pp. 1071, 1077.

From the mid-1920s onwards, Page had increasingly found that in order to advance his developmentalist ideas, he needed to make accommodations with a constitution and a federal system that he otherwise disdained. As a patient and principled opportunist, Page was encouraged, even excited, by how wartime provided a unique chance to put this approach into practice. The most promising way forward in 1944, he said, was not a referendum but actually 'the co-operative method, exemplified by the Loan Council'.⁵⁰ The war had familiarised the states and the Australian public with the exercise of central power over railways, agriculture, marketing and energy. This created the conditions for reasoned, patriotic appeals for support of a voluntary temporary transfer of selected responsibilities to the Commonwealth. Page concluded that the Commonwealth should approach this carefully by first convening a special conference with the states to effect this transfer, and only much later following up with a referendum to make these changes permanent.⁵¹ Page turned out to be essentially right in his fears about strategy: the referendum of August 1944 succeeded in only two states, an early signal that the public was tiring of wartime controls. This major failure forced the Curtin and Chifley governments to turn reluctantly to reliance on cooperation from the states, a major constraint on their post-war reconstruction program.⁵²

Page falters in the post-war environment

In wartime, there developed within the Commonwealth Government a confidence that post-war reconstruction would present a unique opportunity to build a fairer, more prosperous nation. Coombs later reflected that:

we had faith in the intellectual model of the economic system and our capacity to manage it; we believed that it could in practice deliver benefits to both producer and consumer; we had the ear and the confidence of a Prime Minister and a Treasurer who combined vision with executive competence; we were conscious that there was in the community generally a conviction that a better world could be built.⁵³

50 Ibid., p. 1072.

51 Speech to Convention by Page, 30 November 1942, EPP, folder 886.

52 Stuart Macintyre, 'The post-war reconstruction project.', in Samuel Furphy (ed.), *The Seven Dwarfs and the Age of the Mandarins: Australian Government Administration in the Post-War Reconstruction Era*, ANU Press, Canberra, 2015, p. 36.

53 H.C. Coombs, *Trial Balance: Issues of My Working Life*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1981, p. 27.

To this end, Curtin, Chifley and their intellectual supporters hoped that public acceptance of wartime planning and direction would carry over into a post-war tolerance of economic controls. This official optimism – perhaps more inspired hope – in practice ran up against the growing public weariness with government regulation that had helped defeat the 1944 referendum. Page should have prospered amid such optimism, but soon encountered the consequences of shifts in party politics and policy-making.

Page's vision of national development was outwardly compatible with the government's main strategies for post-war reconstruction: regionalism, infrastructure projects, communality and expert-led national policy planning. New planning-oriented agencies and inquiries had begun to appear early during the war. In June 1940, under the Menzies Government, the Loan Council appointed a coordinator-general of Public Works to assess the economic and military significance of works proposed by state governments.⁵⁴ The Curtin Government went further by proposing both a powerful national works commission to evaluate all new major construction projects and a reserve program of projects to be deployed if needed to cushion the employment consequences of demobilisation.⁵⁵ This idea fell foul of resistance from the states, but a National Works Council was established in 1943 as an adjunct to the Premiers' Conference to 'promote development of national resources according to a long-term programme' and make recommendations to the Loan Council on proposals submitted by the states.⁵⁶ The Commonwealth Housing Commission, also formed in 1943, described planning as 'a conscious effort to guide the development of the resources of the nation' and proposed a Commonwealth Planning Authority to bring together all agencies dealing with public works, industry and housing.⁵⁷

Post-war reconstruction's similarity to Page's vision needs to be qualified in one important respect. Despite strong economic growth during the war years – real gross domestic product rose by 26 per cent between 1939 and 1946 – much of the Labor Government's planning for peacetime was motivated by an overarching fear of large-scale unemployment reminiscent

54 Heather Curtis, 'Planning for national development', *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 3, September 1954, p. 55.

55 Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, p. 191.

56 Australia, Parliament, *Full Employment in Australia*, White Paper, Government Printer, Canberra, 1945.

57 Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, p. 182.

of the Great Depression.⁵⁸ David Rivett, chief executive officer of the CSIR, for example warned in 1941 that 'the only completely satisfactory method of dealing with unemployment devised by man seems to be war'.⁵⁹ Developmentalist policy of this time was frequently presented as a means of avoiding the economic disaster of the previous decade, hence an early post-war emphasis on direct public investment in growth. The Curtin Government's 1945 White Paper on Full Employment opened with the proclamation that 'full employment is a fundamental aim of the Commonwealth government'.⁶⁰ This crucially important goal rarely appeared in Page's own pronouncements on national development.

To his chagrin, Page was never given any formal role by the post-war Chifley Government. His invitation to the 1942 Constitutional Convention and service on the Advisory War Council in 1942–43 and 1944–45 remained temporary aberrations attributable to the necessities of war and politics, and to recognition of the expertise he had gained in London.⁶¹ Page did not even earn a mention in *Regional Development Journal* produced by the Department of Post-War Reconstruction. He came to resent this exclusion from issues on which he felt past contributions gave him a rightful role transcending the party divide. There emerged a discernible bitterness in speeches in which he goaded government figures with whom he had formerly worked well, including Chifley himself. The government simply did not feel it needed Page's guidance.

Amid strident debates over whether post-war development should be led by government planning or private enterprise, Page, as so often, diverged from his party political peers. Harold Holt spoke in 1944 of the danger of 'a regimented Australia, a drab grey world in which every human being is pushed around'. Fellow Liberal Eric Spooner warned of 'some outdated theology which tried to make people come to heel by the threat of hell fire'.⁶² Page did not place such stress on the rights of the individual and was far less suspicious of extending government-led planning into peacetime. Herbert Gepp, Charles Kemp of the Institute of Public Affairs and most other business leaders of the time tended to be more assertively individualist, perhaps in reaction to the socialist associations of a Labor Government. Despite newly acquired Keynesian sympathies, they tolerated

58 Yule in John Connor, Peter Stanley and Peter Yule, *The War at Home*, The Centenary History of Australia and the Great War, volume 4, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2015, p. 77.

59 Quoted in Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, p. 66.

60 Australia, Parliament, *Full Employment in Australia*.

61 Page's own account stresses the latter motivation; see *Truant Surgeon*, p. 366.

62 Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, p. 261.

government-led planning only to the extent that it was a public–private collaboration that allowed private enterprise freedom of action, such as the very selective use of public works. Page agreed that private enterprise was critically important and fiercely opposed the Chifley Government's bank nationalisation, but remained more comfortable with government playing a central role in planning regionalisation and electrification that would harness the power of the private sector. At a 1945 celebration of his 25 years in parliament, he spoke of how 'the real challenge to Australian progress is fear and timidity in undertaking full tasks necessary to the fulfilment of our destiny': the nation's post-war future 'lies in a big, constructive plan of development'.⁶³

Nor did Page have a particularly strong personal standing among the policy intellectuals who proliferated in the post-war environment. James Walter writes of diverse new groups of applied thinkers that included economists, bankers, academics, theologians, unionists, public servants and others, and divides them into 'bureaucratic reconstructionists' who favoured collective and state-directed action, and more technocratic 'business progressives'.⁶⁴ Although Page's ideas overlapped with those held by many of these thinkers, he did not fit neatly into either current of thought. He retained a strong rural bias, and the National Council episode of a few years earlier showed that his interaction with more thoughtful business leaders did not guarantee support for his brand of developmentalism.

Page's divergence from new post-war intellectual trends was a factor in his difficulty in coping with changes in the conduct of government, especially the role of the Commonwealth Public Service. The first post-1945 annual report of the Commonwealth Public Service Board recognised a wartime shift in the functions of government from 'regulation' to more 'positive and constructive responsibilities'.⁶⁵ Stuart Macintyre, the foremost historian of post-war reconstruction, sees the wartime increase in central direction as having demanded stronger economic and other policy skills in the federal bureaucracy, leading to 'an influx of younger, university-trained officers drawn from the networks in which the schemes of social meliorism and rational improvement were nurtured'.⁶⁶

63 *Daily Examiner*, 1 November 1945, p. 3.

64 Walter in Brian Head and James Walter (eds), *Intellectual Movements and Australian Society*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988, especially pp. 244–63.

65 Quoted in Nicholas Brown, 'The Seven Dwarfs: A team of rivals', in Furphy, *The Seven Dwarfs*, p. 20.

66 Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, p. 471.

These changes resulted in a government with a very different way of analysing issues than Page's instinctive approach. Major departments now boasted an intelligentsia of economics-trained staff committed not only to Keynesian theory and a planning-oriented world view, but also the rigorous assessment of project proposals. Even before the war, outspoken young Australian academic economists were ahead of most of their international counterparts in taking a close interest in macroeconomic demand management.⁶⁷ The new post-war cohort of young economists had backgrounds quite unlike that of Page. Coombs himself had studied at the London School of Economics, and in post-war Canberra he built a powerful personal network of university-trained economists, bankers and public servants, including R.C. Mills, Douglas Copland, Leslie Melville, John Crawford, L.F. Giblin and Trevor Swan.⁶⁸

Page had little empathy with this style of public service: he preferred advisers who validated his own predispositions. He supported a certain efficiency in resource allocation, as reflected in his cautious approach to tariffs, but repeatedly rejected discouraging findings about the likely returns on hydroelectric projects and doubts about the planned decentralisation of industry. Page favoured expenditure on public works mainly to provide rural infrastructure and to advance his vision of decentralisation. He was attracted only to those economists, such as Roland Wilson, with a strong interest in development and long-term growth. (Wilson was Commonwealth statistician for most of this immediate post-war period, during which time he continued to support planning but in a limited sense of coordinating the many forms of government policy intervention now in play.)⁶⁹ Page remained driven by his deep emotional commitment to regionalism and decentralisation, rather than openness to new intellectual trends that placed these goals within inclusive social policies and overarching economic management. His wartime diary details many meetings with important public figures in Britain but makes no mention of Keynes or his acolytes.

Changes in the conduct of government were also given an institutional basis by Australia being one of the few nations to draw together all the pressing policy challenges of these years – issues as diverse as demobilisation, conversion of munitions production, housing, immigration, social welfare

67 Alex Millmow, 'Australia and the Keynesian revolution', in Furphy, *The Seven Dwarfs*, p. 53.

68 Walter, *What Were They Thinking?*, pp. 181, 183–4.

69 Selwyn Cornish, 'Sir Roland Wilson – *Primus inter pares*', in Furphy, *The Seven Dwarfs*, pp. 135–6.

and education – under the one label of post-war reconstruction.⁷⁰ The Department of Post-War Reconstruction was established in December 1942 to provide policy oversight, with Chifley as minister. It initially oversaw the planning of a more productive and equitable economy through an array of expert commissions of inquiry, notably the Rural Reconstruction Commission, the Commonwealth Housing Commission and the Secondary Industries Commission. The department was to guide and coordinate these investigations and then draw on their findings in formulating policy for implementation by line agencies. As these various planning and policy commissions progressively completed their work, they were replaced by divisions of the department, including regional and rural divisions. This all made Post-War Reconstruction a small but powerfully placed agency, and the foremost target of Page's lobbying. Coombs failed to establish an outright department of economic planning.⁷¹

Page was frustrated but undeterred by his exclusion. As will be seen, he still pushed issues onto the Commonwealth Government's agenda through his persistent lobbying. He also appealed to public and elite opinion through non-governmental forums and the media, and maintained an occasional presence amongst the diverse milieu of post-war developmentalist thinkers. Page provided among the broadest of visions for the post-war nation by linking cooperative federalism, decentralisation, higher education, hydroelectricity, planning and regionalism, and by proposing emulation of the famed Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which had assumed 'totemic significance' in the post-war world.⁷²

Page's attempt to engage with the Rural Reconstruction Commission proved an early instance of his difficulties with post-war expert studies. Wartime broadened direct Commonwealth regulation of primary industry, often by drawing on special powers that would have been politically unacceptable in peacetime. Persistently low prices for primary products throughout the preceding decade had encouraged an array of debt relief, financial assistance and dual pricing schemes that by propping up small, non-mechanised producers delayed adjustments and modernisation.⁷³ The Rural Reconstruction Commission was established in 1942 amid the wartime loss of markets and shortages of materials and

70 Macintyre, 'The post-war reconstruction project', in Furphy, *The Seven Dwarfs*, p. 32.

71 Ibid., pp. 36, 46–7; Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, p. 142.

72 Cullather, *The Hungry World*, p. 120.

73 Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, pp. 161–2.

labour that suggested a bleak outlook for rural industries. Page appears to have assumed that the commission would empathise with his views. In practice, it proved to be an independent-minded inquiry dominated by the banker C.R. Lambert and the agricultural scientist Samuel Wadham, with less input from fellow commissioners who included Page's former departmental head, J.F. Murphy.

The commission drew heavily on economic advice and made many compromises. The Bureau of Agricultural Research, under the direction of John Crawford, drafted its submissions to Cabinet and the Australian Agricultural Council vetted commission reports prior to publication.⁷⁴ The commission approached agriculture as essentially an industry like any other, and so should also be subject to considerations of scale and efficiency. Government support should not be based on subsidisation that made farmers mendicants, but rather should stress aiding skilled and enterprising producers such as by offering technical advice and social amenities.⁷⁵ Limiting its direct effectiveness was that most of the commission's recommendations required action by the states, not the Commonwealth.

Among the numerous underscored passages in Page's personal copy of the commission's third report, on land utilisation and farm settlement, is a glowing assessment of the DMC as 'a most beneficial influence by curbing the exuberance of many proposals'.⁷⁶ But he would have been gravely disappointed by the commission's failure to call unambiguously for revival of a similar such body. It instead vaguely recommended 'detailed machinery for co-ordination of public works' to 'ensure that productive capacity is correlated to prospective market demands'.⁷⁷ This evident compromise matches comments about differences between the commissioners and with the Department of Post-War Reconstruction on how to implement Commonwealth-state cooperation on long-term planning. Wadham, critic of the AAC's Standing Committee, thought that rural people would reject expert planners and so instead proposed leadership by selected progressive farmers.⁷⁸

74 Troy Whitford and Don Boadle, 'Australia's Rural Reconstruction Commission, 1943–46: A reassessment', *Australian Journal of History and Politics*, vol. 54, no. 4, December 2008, pp. 532–3.

75 Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, pp. 149–50, 168–73.

76 Rural Reconstruction Commission, *Third Report, Land Utilisation and Farm Settlement*, The Commission, Canberra, 1944, p. 93.

77 *Ibid.*, pp. 93, 97.

78 Whitford and Boadle, 'Australia's Rural Reconstruction Commission', pp. 531–4.

Page's bids to lead post-war cooperative federalism, regionalism and higher education

Page's efforts to influence post-war reconstruction strategies focused on federalism, regionalism, higher education and the Clarence River. His ideas had enough overlap with the Commonwealth Government's own vision for it at least to understand and formally respond to his many entreaties, but through a veil of refusal to share power with him.

Changes in modes of policy formulation and the rise of nationally led planning had significant implications for attitudes to federalism. A majority view emerged favouring centralism, which left Page playing an important contrary role as advocate of a cooperative federalism that institutionalised Commonwealth and state policy collaboration. The dominant intellectual attitude to federalism was that total Commonwealth ascendancy over the states was inevitable and desirable, as set out in the fullest contemporary study, the historian Gordon Greenwood's 1946 *The Future of Australian Federalism*. Greenwood considered federalism merely a stage on the way to a concentration of political power that matched the nation's growing economic unification, albeit with scope remaining to delegate policy implementation to the local level. Reminiscent as this was of Page's own national policy–regional implementation split, Greenwood otherwise assailed cooperative federalism as 'dilatory and ineffective', despite having been given a 'fair trial'.⁷⁹

Active support for cooperative federalism did not extend much beyond Page and his confirmed admirers, notably Drummond. At the 1942 Constitutional Convention, Page had proposed Commonwealth–state coordinating councils that would elevate development to a national imperative, and 'the whole administration of this huge business organisation could be withdrawn from politics altogether'.⁸⁰ These would 'either induce the states to place definite agreed-on powers in the Constitution into the hands of the Commonwealth, or some agreement as to what parts of each of these subjects should be handled by the Commonwealth

79 Gordon Greenwood, *The Future of Australian Federalism: A Commentary on the Working of the Constitution*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1946, pp. 298–9, 303–4.

80 'Sir Earle Page – Constitutional Convention, Canberra, 1/12/42', EPP, folder 888.

would be arrived at'. Page even suggested 'a permanent organisation' for determining state and Commonwealth powers, and harked back to his National Council idea of 1938–39.⁸¹

After the 1944 referendum, Page increasingly turned to public appeals via the popular press. He portrayed successful cooperative mechanisms ranging from the Loan Council down to the River Murray Commission as collectively establishing an unanswerable case for institutionalised cooperation across finance, industrial policy, transport and power generation: effectively 'a Cabinet of governments'.⁸² Page in one post-war speech even made a Wellsian reference to federalism as a basis for eventual 'world government'.⁸³ Coombs noted a pattern of the Commonwealth using its financial powers to set post-war policy and then leaving implementation to state governments, but considered this a regrettable necessity following the Commonwealth's failure to secure the necessary constitutional authority for itself.⁸⁴

Two other great Page passions proved more central than cooperative federalism to Commonwealth post-war reconstruction policy – regionalism and decentralisation. The mid-1940s marked the high point of official and intellectual interest in these related concepts. The policies of the Chifley Government bore distinct similarities to Page's views of a generation earlier, albeit amid differences on whether regional entities should have sovereign status. In the 1920s and 1930s such causes had mainly been driven by new statism, with Page the main figure to look further towards nationwide change. As the post-war period loomed, support for regionalism and decentralisation broadened beyond the Country Party-linked rural elite that Page knew so well. It attracted not just the policy-oriented intellectuals with which Australia abounded such as Bland (now a convert to new states) and MacDonald Holmes, but increasingly also more technocratic government-based figures including Coombs.

81 Speech by Page to Constitutional Convention, 26 November 1942, EPP, folder 888.

82 Page, 'Federal state conflict – co-operation needed for effective government,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 February 1945, p. 2; also speech to Constitutional Association of New South Wales, Sydney, 13 September 1948, copy at EPP, folder 1033. Bland was the association's vice-president.

83 Page speech to Constitutional Association of New South Wales, Sydney, *ibid.* H.G. Wells had long been the foremost advocate of a united world government.

84 Coombs, *Trial Balance*, pp. 59–60, 62.

Page's sense of personally owning regionalism and decentralisation led him to expect a commensurately major role in their implementation. He used the press to help spread his perception that the TVA stood for regional planning at its best, drawing credibility from actually having visited it. Intermediate-level regional bodies should sit between the Commonwealth and the states, 'unifying the principles of local knowledge and initiative with those of central supervision and assistance'. The TVA was the model by which Australia could 'follow the American example of establishing regional organisations which control physical and geographical units which often may involve handling parts of different states', such as northern New South Wales and southern Queensland, and the Murray and Snowy region. Page also wanted greatly expanded tied Commonwealth grants to finance big projects that the states could not implement alone, such as airports and rural electrification, as 'federal aid unites skilfully the principles of local initiative and central supervision'.⁸⁵ Regional authorities would implement national policies determined by a federal power commission, a federal water commission and a ministry of food.⁸⁶ His enthusiasm evinced his not infrequent unawareness of how others might not be quite so moved by his visions: in December 1944 he made an international radio broadcast to the peoples of wartime Britain and the United States on the TVA model and the importance of the Clarence Valley.⁸⁷

Page's expectation of receptiveness to these ideas ignored fundamental differences between his world view and that of the Commonwealth Government. He thought that decentralisation had been decisively encouraged by the wartime siting of munitions factories in country towns and the application of 'an Australian uniform rate book' to the transport of government goods by rail that overcame the centralised focus of rail systems. Page had long argued that differential rail freight rates channelled trade to capital cities rather than 'natural outlets'.⁸⁸ But contemporary official accounts instead attributed the elevation of decentralisation and regional planning into the policy mainstream to how the federal government organised the war effort. In its 1949 monograph *Regional*

85 Page in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 February 1945, p. 2.

86 Page speech 'Australian Power and Water Development', 16 June 1945, EPP, folder 1205.

87 EPP, folder 1067.

88 'History of Decentralisation: Speech by Sir Earle Page', in Decentralisation and New State Movement Convention, *Decentralisation and New State Movement: Armidale Convention, June 1948*, The Convention, Armidale, NSW, 1948, pp. 27, 34.

Planning in Australia, the Department of Post-War Reconstruction pointed to the precedent of the wartime regional organisation of government administration. Regionally based structures were thought capable of continuing to function following the disruption of central command. The department also credited Curtin with being impressed by a 'marked tendency' for local councils to propose projects for their respective regions.⁸⁹

The department's enthusiasm for community as a basis for a new social order took further inspiration from the cooperative efforts of the residents of the South Australian town of Nuriootpa to provide local facilities to help retain its young residents.⁹⁰ Coombs recalled other influences, including the TVA, writers such as Lewis Mumford and the Rural Reconstruction Commission's stress on the local provision of rural amenities. 'It is difficult in retrospect', he wrote, 'to recapture the intellectual excitement which these ideas generated'.⁹¹ Coombs's department reissued an Army Education Service *Current Affairs Bulletin* that condemned centralism as contributing to every social ill from housing shortages to 'weakening of citizenship'.⁹² As early as August 1944, Evatt publicly suggest a TVA-like body for the Murray Valley, an idea encouraged by the locally based Murray Valley Development League but disdained by state governments.⁹³

89 Department of Post-War Reconstruction, *Regional Planning in Australia: A History of Progress and Review of Regional Planning Activities through the Commonwealth*, Department of Post-War Reconstruction, Canberra, 1949, pp. vii, 1.

90 Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, pp. 195–8; see also Coombs, *Trial Balance*, p. 61.

91 Coombs, *Trial Balance*, pp. 59–60.

92 'Regionalism', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, vol. 18, no. 5, 5 November 1945; copy in Ulrich Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 13, folder 35.

93 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 August 1944, p. 5.

Figure 10: Post-war Australia divided into 97 Regional Development Committees, as seen by the Chifley Government.

Source: Courtesy of National Library of Australia, MAP G8961.G2 1949 (Copy 1), creator Department of Post-war Reconstruction. Regional Development Division, prepared by the National Mapping Section, Department of the Interior, 1949.

In October 1944 Curtin proposed to all six premiers an ambitious program of cooperative regionalisation to promote decentralisation and national security. The states would define regional boundaries and survey local resources, then form 'representative regional advisory bodies'.⁹⁴ These were to collectively create a national network of 97 Regional Development Committees, through each of which state and local government representatives and other nominees would prepare local development plans. Curtin identified the Murray Valley, Newcastle and the Northern Territory as deserving particular attention – not the Clarence Valley.⁹⁵ His government was claiming the decentralisation–regionalisation concept as its own: its public pronouncements ignored Page, the Country Party and new state movements. (Nor was there reference, it appears, to antecedents in the ALP's pre-war platform.) Curtin's regionalism, however, gained only limited political traction. Committees were formed in just Victoria, New South Wales and Tasmania, and remained strictly advisory bodies that failed to gain the full commitment of state governments or local councils.⁹⁶

Another problem here for Page was that the widening of interest in regionalism and decentralisation presented him with a far more diverse range of motivators and goals to navigate than had the Country Party–dominated agitation of the inter-war years. He would have applauded the call by F.K. Maher and J.I. Sullivan in a 1946 booklet for 'vigorous, self-governing regions', 'severe limitations' on construction in the big cities and the harnessing of river systems (which noted Page's efforts concerning the Clarence).⁹⁷ But the Methodist Page was not part of the lively strand of Catholic regionalist thought with which Maher was closely associated through the Australian National Secretariat of Catholic Action that he headed with B.A. Santamaria. Catholic social theorists were attracted by the religiosity of rural communities, hence the National Catholic Rural Movement advocating 'the spiritual restoration of the country' through rural settlement.⁹⁸ More secular intellectual support for decentralisation appeared in such journals as *Current Affairs Bulletin* and *Australian Quarterly*.⁹⁹

94 Department of Post-War Reconstruction, *Regional Planning in Australia*, pp. viii, 13.

95 Ibid., p. 1.

96 Macintyre, *Australia's Boldest Experiment*, pp. 414–15.

97 F.K. Maher and J.I. Sullivan, *Regionalism in Australia*, Araluen Publishing Company, Melbourne, 1946, pp. 3, 45, 46.

98 Gerard Henderson, *Mr. Santamaria and the Bishops*, St Patrick's College, Manly, 1982, p. 57.

99 See for example 'Industries for the country', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, vol. 4, no. 2, 11 April 1949; and E.J. Tapp, 'Decentralisation and the individual', *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 2, June 1948, pp. 82–90.

The diversity of interest was reflected in the range of speakers at a string of major conferences that addressed decentralisation. These included a January 1948 AIPS conference at Armidale, a New South Wales Local Government Association Local Government school of August 1948 and an All-Australian Federal Convention on constitutional change held in Sydney in July 1949. The latter event was convened by Bland's New South Wales Constitutional League, and amongst the other participants were Harold Nicholas (the same of the Boundaries Royal Commission), Alex Gibson, Richard Windeyer, MacDonald Holmes, H.L. Harris, Drummond and Bruxner. Most intellectual supporters of decentralisation linked regionalism to national and regional planning but some, including Bland and Gibson, saw it as a counter to centralised political control. Page's packaging of federal units with strong national government made it hard for him to use this Cold War-influenced argument. Bland, now well-established as Australia's leading scholar of public administration, became outspoken on inserting regional administrative entities between local and state governments so as to counter centralism. Gibson saw strong state and regional authorities as 'sure means by which the effect of centralised power and industrial concentration can be obviated'.¹⁰⁰ Interest in decentralisation also contributed to a modest revival in new statism. The New England movement reappeared in June 1948 when a new organisation was established at Armidale presided over by Phillip Wright. In March 1949 Premier Ned Hanlon of Queensland raised the subdivision of his home state, and a new local movement appeared at Townsville. Soon after, Premier Thomas Hollway of Victoria suggested a new state based on Gippsland and south-eastern New South Wales.¹⁰¹

Page contributed at least indirectly to this renewed interest in regionalism and decentralisation by having helped sustain such ideas in political discourse since the last revival in the early 1930s. Although most 1940s proponents worked to community-oriented agendas more focused on addressing rural poverty than Page's grander nationwide vision, some

100 See F.A. Bland, 'Post-war constitutional reconstruction', *Public Administration*, vol. 2, no. 3, September–December 1940, pp. 136–55; F.A. Bland, 'Towards regionalism', *Public Administration*, vol. 4, no. 8, December 1943, pp. 379–85; and F.A. Bland, 'Decentralization – the machinery of government', in H.L. Harris, H.S. Nicholas, F.A. Bland, A. Mainerd and T. Hytten, *Decentralization*, Angus and Robertson in conjunction with the Australian Institute of Political Science, Sydney, 1948, pp. 67–120. For Gibson, see 'The implications of decentralisation', in *Decentralisation and New State Movement Convention, Decentralisation and New State Movement*, pp. 7, 10.

101 See John Joseph Farrell, 'Opting out and opting in: Secession and the New State Movements', *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal*, no. 40, 1997, p. 148; and Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, p. 277.

nonetheless matched particular ideas he had long publicised nationally. At the AIPS conference, Harris was conceptually closest to Page's ideas about the potential of decentralisation to draw out the best social qualities. It would, he said, lead to 'a heightened social consciousness and a quickening of the community spirit with new standards and values and richer personalities'. Harris added that decentralisation was 'essentially a population policy directed to the preservation of the race and to the improvement of its quality', a racial cast that Page did not employ.¹⁰² A 1944 booklet originally published as an article by the Institution of Engineers echoed Page's National Council by proposing the nation's division into six regions, all overseen by a national planning authority working with regional planning commissions.¹⁰³ Even Maher and Sullivan upheld the link between decentralisation and planning by recommending the use of freight schemes, tariffs and electrification as planning tools, much as Page had proposed.¹⁰⁴

By the immediate post-war period, three decades of disappointment had made Page alert to opportunities to broaden his case for decentralisation and regionalisation. His major statements reflected the post-war interest in regional equity in social amenities. In his foremost speech of this period on new states, delivered in June 1948 to a convention in Armidale, Page declared that decentralisation would 'give equal opportunity to all Australian citizens in facilities of education, culture and health, in security of work for their families, in professional and business careers and in the provision of domestic amenities'. Page became increasingly prone to quoting selectively from major intellectual figures: his Armidale speech drew on Mumford's writings on self-governing political units large enough (as Page put it) to 'embrace a sufficient range of interests and small enough to keep these interests in focus and make them a subject of direct collective concern'.¹⁰⁵ With the advent of the Cold War, Page again employed defence-related arguments. 'Australia's great need', he told the All-Australian Federal Convention, 'is to get enough people

102 Harris et al., *Decentralization*, pp. 18, 20.

103 C.M. Longfield and T.A. Lang, *Regional Planning*, RAAF Educational Services, Melbourne, 1944 (first published in *The Journal of The Institution of Engineers, Australia*, August 1943), copy in Ellis papers, NLA, MS 1006, box 12, series 6A, folder 29.

104 Maher and Sullivan, *Regionalism in Australia*, p. 35.

105 'History of Decentralisation: Speech by Sir Earle Page', in Decentralisation and New State Movement Convention, *Decentralisation*, pp. 25, 29.

quickly to develop her latent resources and thus ensure the defence of our Continent', for which 'local self-government by the creation of new states with consequent acceleration of local development is the real answer'.¹⁰⁶

The higher quality debate on regionalism helped develop Page's own ideas. He had long been neither clear nor consistent about how he defined a viable region for a new state or federal unit. But in speeches during 1945 he referred to their being delineated by common farming conditions and similar 'agricultural, scientific and research problems' of water, irrigation and fodder conservation.¹⁰⁷ His new federal units were also to include those parts of large states that were too distant to be governed effectively from an existing state capital. Page specified several regions as particularly suited for regional development, namely the Murray Valley, southern, central and northern Queensland, and northern and central New South Wales.¹⁰⁸ In 1949 he spoke of a prospective 18 new states as the beginning of a process of national subdivision into smaller units. He made clearer than ever his disdain for the 'boa-contractor' of the big city, beset by 'all sorts of social diseases', and proposed towns of from 30,000 up to 250,000 inhabitants.¹⁰⁹

Decentralisation and regionalisation still struggled to be actually implemented even in this post-war period when the political portents had initially seemed good. Dwindling fears of a post-war slump removed the sense of urgency: gradually policy debate shifted away from regionalism and planning towards the politically popular dismantling of government controls. One casualty was enthusiasm for the TVA, an example of Page's tendency to leave drawbacks to be pointed out by others. William McKell, Labor premier of New South Wales since 1941 and a decentralisation enthusiast, visited the TVA in 1945 and publicly pronounced it 'not generally adaptable to Australian conditions'. Far from being the strong sovereign body of legend, the TVA received considerable federal funding and its regional powers were limited essentially to planning and research.¹¹⁰ Significantly for Page's post-war role, McKell's findings were quoted at

106 Earle Page, 'Why New States?', speech to All-Australian Federal Convention 25–26 July 1949, in F.A. Bland (ed.), *Changing the Constitution: Proceedings of the All-Australian Federal Convention, 25th and 26th July 1949*, The New South Wales Constitutional League, Sydney, 1950, p. 95.

107 Speech entitled 'Australian Power and Water Development', 1945, EPR, folder 1994 (part 1).

108 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 19 June 1945, p. 3270.

109 Page, 'Why New States?', in Bland, *Changing the Constitution*, pp. 99, 103–4.

110 W.J. McKell, *The Tennessee Valley Authority (USA): Report by the Hon. W.J. McKell KC, MLA, December 1945*, Government Printer, Sydney, 1945, pp. 13–14.

length in the Department of Post-War Reconstruction's *Regional Planning in Australia*.¹¹¹ Coombs himself later admitted that wartime interest in community-led regionalisation eventually dwindled to a more prosaic emphasis on local administrative efficiency and the delivery of specific projects. Regional planning, he said, 'flew in the face of the logic of the developing world economic system'.¹¹²

Another post-war policy field in which Page similarly attempted to engage with a surge in interest but then encountered a resistant political environment was higher education. Post-war reconstruction saw Australia's first extensive public debates on the role of universities. Attitudes to tertiary education changed greatly during the 1940s as the Commonwealth began funding universities as a national investment. Commonwealth grants for universities dated from 1936, but it was Curtin who in 1943 signalled a major commitment to widening access to tertiary education by establishing the Universities Commission to supervise the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme for returned servicemen and women.

The wider – and lively – post-war debate on universities is a further instance of Page's views being so strongly tied to decentralisation and regionalism that they veered far from the mainstream. Australian universities had for the first time played a major practical public role by providing technical support for the war effort, such as in manufacturing gun sights and controlling malaria. (Page assumed a significant role in malaria control, partly through his appointments to the Advisory War Council. In April 1943 he led an investigative party to New Guinea and pondered using malaria as a weapon by maximising Japanese exposure to mosquitos. Page remained proud of his work on malaria, to which he devoted a chapter of his memoirs.¹¹³) Tension developed between casting universities as bastions of civilising knowledge, or whether they should be reoriented towards a vocational role that addressed the goals of post-war reconstruction, as encouraged by Coombs.¹¹⁴ Page sought to influence this emerging debate by proposing a unique alternative to the expansion of existing metropolitan universities. He does not appear to have been drawn to the view, common today, that the main merit of rural universities was

111 Department of Post-War Reconstruction, *Regional Planning in Australia*, p. 17.

112 Coombs, *Trial Balance*, p. 65.

113 See Page, *Truant Surgeon*, Chapter 41.

114 Hannah Forsyth, *A History of the Modern Australian University*, NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, 2014, pp. 25, 39, 49.

the direct boosting of economic prospects in their immediate regions. Instead, he drew on his ideals of decentralisation and institutional scale to propose that universities serve as tools of social construction. This was a fine example of how widely he could apply his basic views to produce a coherent alternative to the mainstream of opinion.

Page set out his vision of higher education in his May 1945 contribution to the parliamentary debate on the Re-establishment and Employment Bill to support the education of returned servicemen and women. They should not be relegated 'to large universities or big technical colleges, where they are regarded more or less as ciphers or numbers instead of personalities, [which] may wreck their whole future individual life and their value to the nation'. They should instead be directed to small institutions such as the New England and Canberra University colleges, 'where much more personal and intimate contact is made with the teachers'. (Page recalled how during his medical studies he was one of only 19 students.) He joined calls for the Commonwealth to take a firmer lead on funding universities and other levels of education via a central controlling body.¹¹⁵ An adjunct here was Page's interest in a proposed national university in Canberra. This should also be cast as a small residential institution, which could train diplomats and 'make certain that boys and girls shall be able to obtain a first-class knowledge of international affairs'.¹¹⁶

Page's perception of education as a means of social engineering implies a not inconsiderable faith in human malleability. No more effusive statement of this exists than the prescription for secondary schooling he presented to the June 1947 Macleay River Teachers' Association Educational Conference. To Page, 'a district high school is a wonderful instrument' to 'mould the lives of students, influence the destiny of districts and, thereby, control the fate of the nation'. His ideal school would have 'noble buildings and grounds of ample proportion'. Curricula must create the 'groundwork of understanding' via rural, technical and cultural strands. The school library should impart 'a love of books that will carry on to adult life'. All country

115 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 16 May 1945, p. 1793. There is contemporary evidence that university size indeed had a bearing on undergraduate performance. In 1944 the Commonwealth Universities Commission released data indicating that despite lower entrance standards, undergraduates at New England University College were ahead of their Sydney University counterparts after only one year of study; see statement by the Advisory Council, New England University College, 17 January 1945, 'The Great Success of New England University College; Statistical Report From the Commonwealth Universities Commission', EPP folder 1088 (part 1).

116 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 21 September 1944, pp. 1209–10.

high schools should offer free accommodation to help 'build a community spirit and interest in the school and the industries of the district'. Young men and women would 'get to know one another in a way that is not possible at present'. Children from local towns would experience 'a year or two of practical life on the land'.¹¹⁷ As he recorded in notes for another speech on education, 'I have thought of everything and everything fits in its place'.¹¹⁸

Support for Page's vision came mainly from that hotbed of decentralism, New England. In 1948 the warden of New England University College, J.P. Belshaw, wrote in favour of residential institutions that used the tutorial system and reached out to local regions. A.J. Greenhalgh of Armidale Teachers' College called for state-run boarding schools where rural students could overcome the population dispersal that otherwise rendered rural area schools impractical.¹¹⁹ But more prominent in national debate were a series of 11 widely read booklets issued by the influential Australian Council for Educational Research over 1943 to 1946. These were collectively entitled *The Future of Education* and reflect how singular were Page's views on decentralised education. Authors included such city-based academic figures as John Medley, vice-chancellor of Melbourne University, the historian John La Nauze and Eric Ashby of Sydney University Botany Department, who would become a prolific author on higher education.¹²⁰ Despite touching on many fundamental educational issues, they only fleetingly addressed Page's agenda. Ashby's *Universities in Australia* was an articulate defence of the traditional concept of a university that just passingly referred to founding junior colleges in country towns to teach matriculation. He was lukewarm about the practicality of rural universities, and rejected residential universities outright.¹²¹

117 Speech by Page, 'Educational Needs of a Rural Community', to the Macleay River Teachers' Association Educational Conference, Kempsey, 18 June 1947, EPP, folder 2504.

118 See speech notes, EPP, folder 2620; undated, but content suggests being from this same 1940s period.

119 J.P. Belshaw, 'Decentralisation of university education', *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4, December 1948, pp. 67–76; A.J. Greenhalgh, 'The plight of rural education', *Australian Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 3, September 1949, p. 76.

120 W.F. Connell, *The Australian Council for Educational Research 1930–80*, Australian Council for Educational Research, Hawthorn, Vic., 1980, pp. 143–7.

121 Eric Ashby, *Universities in Australia*, The Future of Education series no. 5, Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne, 1944, pp. 26–8.

Page would also have hoped for something much more effusive in the Rural Reconstruction Commission's coverage of education. The sixth report, on farming efficiency and costs, covered technical training in some detail; the seventh, on rural amenities, offered broad support for rural high schools but added that this should recognise the reality that many rural schoolchildren would eventually find themselves in towns or cities.¹²² It was cautious about tertiary education beyond concluding that more than one university in each state was 'unrealistic', while conceding some scope for rural university colleges or 'specially advanced schools'.¹²³

Page again champions hydroelectricity: The Snowy versus the Clarence

In the latter half of the 1940s, Page's interaction with the Chifley Government narrowed to focus on hydroelectricity and the damming of the Clarence River. This drew out his vision of post-war reconstruction to the fullest, but also his frustration that the Clarence did not feature centrally in Commonwealth policy. It nonetheless became the post-war reconstruction issue on which he had the most influence on government. Page's success in keeping this project under Commonwealth consideration and, to a lesser extent, that of two states is a case study of his undaunted persistence and tactical flexibility. Without Page, the Clarence would almost certainly have faded entirely in the face of criticisms by engineers and rivalry from the more glamorous and promising Snowy proposal. Post-war reconstruction presented Page with his best ever chance of getting this treasured project up and running, aided by the Commonwealth's fear that it needed major public works projects on hand should the post-war economic boom falter.

Page foresaw early that post-war reconstruction could create an opportunity for the Clarence region. In October 1943 he convened a meeting of state and federal parliamentarians, including Drummond and Bruxner, at Parliament House, Sydney, to discuss northern electrification.¹²⁴ They were especially interested in having a new transmission line link

122 Rural Reconstruction Commission, *Sixth Report, Farming Efficiency and Costs*, The Commission, Canberra, 1945, pp. 45–70; and *Seventh Report, Rural Amenities*, The Commission, Canberra, 1945, p. 23.

123 Rural Reconstruction Commission, *Seventh Report*, p. 24.

124 See open letter to the press concerning this meeting, 21 October 1943, EPP, folder 2083.

Newcastle, the Nymboida and Brisbane, and in August 1944 McKell agreed to have the Railways Department's power station at Newcastle connected to the Nymboida facility by a 66,000-volt transmission line.¹²⁵ This marks Page's only major practical success in rural electrification other than the establishment of the Nymboida station in 1923.

Page had many obstacles to overcome before the Clarence River could be harnessed. Proposals to exploit the Snowy had a longer provenance, dating back to an irrigation proposal of 1884, and a Snowy River Hydroelectric Development League appeared in 1936.¹²⁶ Debate during the 1930s indicates that although Page's ideas about hydroelectricity had gained some acceptance in the Country Party, much of this was channelled into support for the Snowy. His parliamentary deputy Thomas Paterson told the November 1936 Snowy River Hydroelectric Scheme Conference that electricity was 'perhaps the most important factor in your civilisation', and attributed the success of the Nymboida to a flat rate 'for farm and factory alike'. But he spoke primarily of the Snowy, stressing its potential to encourage industrial development east of the Great Dividing Range (encompassing his electorate of Gippsland).¹²⁷ The Snowy also had a clear edge among professional engineers. Gibson wrote in his 1929 report on power development that the Clarence had the disadvantage of requiring the construction of large storage reservoirs.¹²⁸ The president of the Institution of Engineers reported that the Clarence and the Nymboida were estimated to be capable of generating only a tenth of the hydroelectric power available in the Australian Alps.¹²⁹ Most media reports from the 1930s and early 1940s on Australia's water resources failed even to mention the Clarence.¹³⁰

125 McKell to Page, 8 August 1944, EPP, folder 2086.

126 *The Australian Encyclopedia*, second edition, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1958, volume 8, pp. 171–2. D.J. Hardman, 'The Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority: Origins and antecedents', *Public Administration*, vol. 27, no. 3, September 1968, pp. 205–36, provides a full outline of early proposals to harness the Snowy.

127 Speech to the 'Snowy River Hydro-electric Scheme Conference', Cooma, 27 November 1936, EPP, folder 2704.

128 Gibson, *Report on Power Development in Australia*, p. 23.

129 H.R. Harper, 'Presidential Address', *The Journal of the Institution of Engineers*, Australia, vol. 6, no. 2, February 1934.

130 Such as Lewis R. East, 'Water conservation in Australia', *Walkabout*, vol. 2, no. 11, November 1936, pp. 33–8.

Today, the Snowy Mountains Scheme is commonly presented as the prime contrast between post-war nation-building and a latter-day absence of national foresight. Page became very aware of a growing possibility that this project would leave no room for the Clarence, and fought accordingly. Although he initially hesitated to directly criticise the Snowy – it was still a regional hydroelectric initiative, after all – what support he proffered was highly qualified, especially as he doubted its breadth of regional and national vision. He asserted that the Clarence could provide a starting point for a national grid by linking Sydney, Newcastle and Brisbane. It would be focused on power generation, whereas there was disagreement over the fundamental focus of the Snowy Mountains Scheme. This division was driven by state rivalries – New South Wales favoured irrigation, Victoria hydroelectricity – and delayed the Snowy's commencement.¹³¹ Page's 1949 speech on the legislation to finally implement the Snowy is a statement of his hopes that it would be the starting point for a nationwide power scheme and that the Clarence would not be forgotten, using 'some standardised form of governmental machinery, of a type that could be used for general application throughout Australia'. This would be 'a separate authority for each scheme, but ... so closely interlocked that they will be able to pool men, machinery and equipment'.¹³² In 1958, by which time the Snowy was well advanced, Page reminded the House that the project 'will lose its true significance if the water and power is not used to achieve that decentralised development in adjoining districts which is vital to the survival of the Australian nation'.¹³³

Page's post-war vision of hydroelectricity came to incorporate three main strategies – local oversight by powerful regional authorities, national planning, and using The Gorge project on the Clarence as the starting point for a nationwide network of hydroelectric dams. This national synthesis readily distinguished him from innumerable other boosters of local projects. He spoke of how better land use via the utilisation of water and electricity could support a national population of 20 million, leading to the 'stabilisation of the land industries on a reproductive basis'. A unified national electricity grid would also have a fundamental social

131 Statement 'Australian Power Development – The Importance of the Clarence River Gorge Hydro-Electric Scheme', undated but clearly from this period, EPP, folder 2047. On state differences over the Snowy, see Hardman, 'The Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority', especially pp. 214–24.

132 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 22 June 1949, p. 1353.

133 EPP, folder 2333. The Hansard record of this speech is somewhat different; see *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 13 May 1958, pp. 1742–5.

value, by 'giving the whole of the north of New South Wales and southern Queensland and, in time, the whole of Australia, a high common factor of mutual interest that must bind us together and help us all to appreciate, understand and sympathise with each other's local problems'.¹³⁴ Page again tied such ideas to the wider imperatives of the times by exploiting fears of war and famine, observing that development of the Clarence under a regional authority 'would aid that essential factor to permanent world peace – good food, and plenty of it'.¹³⁵ Since his time in London, Page had frequently dwelt on how food security could contribute to international stability, linking this to guaranteed prices for producers and surveys of nutritional needs. Such ideas had wide support, including from two figures well known to Page, Stanley Bruce and the Australian trade adviser in London, F.L. McDougall.

On local oversight, Page foresaw that development of the Clarence 'should be undertaken by a governmental partnership consisting of the Commonwealth, New South Wales and Queensland Governments, combined with a regional authority'.¹³⁶ As the Australian federal system had a 'blind spot' where no clear state or federal powers applied, a Clarence Valley Authority was needed, 'on all fours with the Tennessee authority'. Australia should emulate American initiative to 'annihilate the distances of space and time, and to bring the amenities of modern civilisation to the most remotely situated peoples in our land'.¹³⁷ Page complemented his appeals to governments with public proselytising, an increasingly common practice of his during this politically challenged phase of his career. He detailed this vision of a regionally managed Clarence in his short but lavish 1944 book *Clarence River Hydro-Electric Gorge Scheme*, replete with diagrams, photographs and maps. (A map from this booklet showing Page's proposed dam network is provided in Chapter 1, Figure 4.) Page personally arranged its production and the distribution of scores of copies to ministers, government agencies, private companies, Australian embassies, libraries and Curtin himself.¹³⁸

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

135 Page, *Clarence River Hydro-Electric Gorge Scheme*, introduction and p. 1.

136 Ibid., quotes from introduction.

137 Broadcast by Page on 2NR (the ABC's Grafton station), 17 December 1944, text at EPP, folder 1077.

138 See for example Page to Curtin, 24 August 1944, NAA, A461, AK423/1/1.

Figure 11: Cover of Page's 1944 booklet, *Clarence River Hydro-Electric Gorge Scheme*.

Source: Courtesy of the Page family.

On national planning, Page in 1944 foresaw a future Australia with a more densely settled countryside that required 'a well-organised agricultural industry' supported by electricity, ample water and 'a guaranteed payable price for their products'. This necessitated guidance by planning authorities – his proposed federal power commission, federal water commission and ministry of food – but with electricity providing

the catalyst. Implementation of this planning-based strategy was to be carried out through an array of TVA-style regional authorities with full executive powers.¹³⁹ The new national grid would encompass both hydro and thermal sources in exploiting 'hitherto neglected, isolated power possibilities'.¹⁴⁰

Page's vision for an Australia-wide network of hydroelectric dams was set out in separate but essentially consistent statements over the next few years. The harnessing of the Nymboida back in 1923 had just been a stage one for the Clarence region, 'to make the surrounding district electricity conscious'. The second stage would be a 220-foot dam at The Gorge that could generate 'over 42,000 kilowatts continuously'. To enable this, 'an agreement for Clarence development with such wide regional and inter-state implications should be made between the Commonwealth, state and local governing authorities', using 'the pattern of the Migration Agreement between Australia and Britain'.¹⁴¹ Damming the Clarence could be followed by a 'nationwide drive' to develop the continent, starting with the deployment of army surveyors to assess regional water resources before constructing new dams and hydroelectric stations tied to a national grid. All along the east coast, new railways would link inland power centres to deep water ports, including one at the mouth of the Clarence.¹⁴² The spread of Page's Clarence model was to be funded by profits from the sale of electricity generated by each new dam, helped by a federal levy to fund grants that covered 50 per cent of the construction costs of expanding rural transmission.¹⁴³

But persuading governments and experts posed a challenge for Page. In 1944–45 he had good grounds for hope, as the Commonwealth was beginning to cast around for public works projects to counteract the anticipated post-war slump. He had no hesitation in approaching the highest levels of government, including the prime minister. Curtin in March 1944 replied to Page noncommittally that the Clarence proposal was subject to prioritisation by the National Works Council and required state government support.¹⁴⁴ In December, Page switched his attention to

139 Page speech 'Australian Power and Water Development', 16 June 1945, EPP, folder 1205.

140 Page, *Clarence River Hydro-Electric Gorge Scheme*, p. 1.

141 Public address by Page at Lismore, 6 June 1947, EPP, folder 874.

142 'Dr. Earle Page's Prescription for National Health & Development', EPP, folder 2295.

143 Press release 'Full Development of the North Coast Rivers', August 1946, EPP, folder 1724.

144 Curtin to Page, 15 March 1944; also 'Collings' to Page on behalf of the Prime Minister, 11 July 1944, both EPP, folder 2086. (Probably Senator Joseph Collings, Minister for the Interior.)

Chifley as minister for post-war reconstruction, suggesting a joint expert study of the Clarence by the Commonwealth and state governments.¹⁴⁵ Harry Brown, Commonwealth coordinator-general of works, was so keen that his main concern was that a technical study led by the states could delay 'vitally urgent post-war public works programs': perhaps the Commonwealth could instil momentum by offering to act as an impartial chair for the study.¹⁴⁶ Following Page's approaches, Chifley wrote to the acting premiers of New South Wales and Queensland in May 1945 proposing a joint study by the three governments. He mentioned Page's support and described the project as possibly 'one of the most important in Australia', relevant to the regional planning then being discussed with premiers.¹⁴⁷ Page simultaneously pursued the engineering profession. In a rather technical speech to the Institution of Engineers, he predicted that the problem of limited local demand of only about 20–25,000 kWh would be overcome by linking the Clarence to a national grid, under which it would sell 50,000 kWh to Brisbane 'at less than half a penny a unit'.¹⁴⁸

The federal system in practice proved a drag on Page's national developmentalism. Significantly for the Clarence's prospects, he attracted more interest from Queensland, which stood to benefit most from the electricity generated, than from the river's host state of New South Wales. The chairman of the Queensland State Electricity Commission, S.F. Cochran, told Coombs in early 1945 that his state was 'most interested'.¹⁴⁹ But the states responded to Chifley by rejecting Commonwealth involvement and making a half-hearted commitment to conduct a short joint study of their own.¹⁵⁰ This study in December 1945 merely concluded that a fuller technical assessment was needed. The New South Wales-led inquiry that followed – the Clarence River Water Resources Investigation Committee, commonly called the Technical Committee – dragged on into 1951 as one of no less than seven expert post-war studies

145 Page to Chifley, 2 December 1944, NAA, A9816, 1944/487 PART 1; see also Coombs to Harry Brown, Co-ordinator-General of Works, 19 January 1945, NAA, A9816, 1944/487 PART 1.

146 Harry Brown to Coombs, 9 April 1945, NAA, A9816, 1944/487 PART 1; see also Coombs to Chifley, 12 April 1945, NAA, A9816, 1944/487 PART 1.

147 The acting premiers were J.M. Baddeley of New South Wales and E.M. Hanlon of Queensland; Chifley letters of 18 May 1945, EPP, folder 1702.

148 Page speech to The Institution of Engineers, Australia, April 1944, EPP, folder 2090 (day not given).

149 Letter to Coombs, 8 January 1945, NAA, A9816, 1944/487 PART 1.

150 See for example letters to Chifley from acting Premier Baddeley of 12 June 1945 and from Premier McKell of 20 November 1946 to Chifley, NAA, A461, AK423/1/1.

of the Clarence Valley in general or The Gorge in particular. Each was properly cautious about consumer demand for a project of such scale: none provided the decisive endorsement Page sought.

Yet it is also clear that Page's efforts were keeping the Clarence at the forefront of high-level official attention, albeit amid persistent doubts. In May 1946 Chifley's successor as minister for post-war reconstruction, John Dedman, wrote to Page stating bluntly that a TVA-style authority was 'undesirable' but adding that the Commonwealth remained interested in the Clarence.¹⁵¹ Dedman did not elaborate, but opposition from McKell would alone have rendered the TVA concept impractical. The paradox now facing Page was that the unexpected persistence of the post-war boom was working against big new projects. Far from unemployment being a problem, there were shortages of labour and materials. A year later the Commonwealth's Controller of Electricity Supply, H.P. Moss, advised the head of the Department of Munitions, John Jensen, that the Clarence proposal was still of interest but should be delayed until there was a need to alleviate unemployment or to cope with coal shortages.¹⁵² When 'the feared unemployment following close on the transition did not eventuate', Commonwealth interest in public works-based developmentalism dwindled, especially that which involved large, longer range projects.¹⁵³

Nor would Page have liked the Rural Reconstruction Commission's mixed findings on electrification. In its first report it had found that to help raise country living standards 'it should be a national objective to give every farm which is not too remote an opportunity to use electricity at a cost which is comparable with that which prevails in the cities'.¹⁵⁴ But in its seventh report, the commission directly challenged assumptions that hydroelectricity would be cheaper than thermal generation. It rejected uniform electricity tariffs as inequitable and likely to retard national electrification. The commission also now more clearly advised against the extension of electricity to all farms, some of which were simply too isolated.¹⁵⁵ In its eighth report, it found that in a continent as dry as Australia, human and animal consumption should have first claim on

151 Dedman to Page, 23 May 1946 (writing on behalf of the Prime Minister), EPP, folder 2090.

152 T. Murdoch on behalf of the Controller, Electricity Supply, to Secretary, Ministry of Munitions, 28 May 1947, NAA, MP61/1, 2/3/422.

153 Coombs, *Trial Balance*, pp. 66–7.

154 Rural Reconstruction Commission, *First Report, A General Rural Survey*, The Commission, Canberra, 1944, p. 46.

155 Rural Reconstruction Commission, *Seventh Report*, pp. 67, 73.

water use, followed by irrigation and only thirdly hydroelectricity. As for the Clarence, the commission paid far more attention to the Snowy and Ord rivers.¹⁵⁶

So disappointed was Page with the Rural Reconstruction Commission's fleeting coverage of northern rivers that early in 1947 he invited the editors of 18 newspapers to join him on a grand tour of east coast rivers from the Brisbane to the Hunter.¹⁵⁷ As they set off, Page assured the seven who accepted that 'with your help, I am confident that wide public interest can be aroused in the vast scope of development which is possible in this richly endowed coastal area'.¹⁵⁸ Four hailed from local newspapers in Page's native northern New South Wales; only three joined from publications in other regions, the *Courier-Mail* and *Telegraph* from Brisbane, and the *Newcastle Herald*.

As enthusiastic as ever, Page led his little band up and down the coast. His Grafton *Daily Examiner* reported delegation members having 'rowed, rode, slithered and slashed their way up to the seat of the proposed dam and hydroelectric station'.¹⁵⁹ Social goals were still at the forefront: Page told the seven that 'it would be impossible to keep the people of the country in the country unless they had the amenities offering in the cities, and this has been shown by the Nymboida'.¹⁶⁰ One editor afterwards politely complained to Page about 'the sustained pressure of our tour'.¹⁶¹ The Queensland press gave Page good publicity with such headlines as 'Surveys Prove Value of Scheme'. But even the sympathetic Brisbane *Telegraph* concluded that along the coastal belt from Newcastle to the Queensland border 'no market exists there for anywhere near 300,000 kilowatts of electricity, the planned output of the completed Gorge scheme', making Queensland's involvement crucial.¹⁶²

Page remained so hopeful that he produced yet another booklet, *Clarence Water-Power Development*, its cover graced with a specially commissioned stylised map of proposed dam sites. This detailed his plan for a 220-foot dam at The Gorge, to be followed by the construction of supplementary

156 Rural Reconstruction Commission, *Eighth Report, Irrigation, Water Conservation and Land Drainage*, The Commission, Canberra, 1945, pp. 24, 58–70.

157 Page letters of 22 November 1946, EPP, folder 2105.

158 Page in the *Daily Examiner*, 31 January 1947, p. 3.

159 *Daily Examiner*, 4 February 1947, p. 2.

160 *Macleay Argus*, 14 February 1947, p. 3.

161 Lyne Young of the Lismore *Northern Star* to Page, 25 February 1947, EPP, folder 2106.

162 *Brisbane Telegraph*, 14 February 1947, p. 2 (headline and quote).

storages so that the whole Clarence system generated at least '125,000 kilowatts continuously' and irrigated 100,000 acres. As so often before, Page thought he had chosen his timing well: 'at this psychological moment, which might never recur, an early decision could launch this outstanding development on a most auspicious and sound basis'.¹⁶³

As official interest shifted towards the Snowy, Page demonstrated his tactical flexibility by returning to the level of government and place where he had the most influence. Over 1948–49, he sought to reorganise local councils in the Clarence Valley into regional authorities based on the TVA model. He exhorted them to join forces so 'a united North could have a definite voice in the extent and manner of that [Gorge dam] development and the disposal and the distribution of the product'. Page proclaimed himself especially well qualified to lead this effort, as he had been personally responsible for both 'the inauguration of the Clarence County Council Scheme' and 'developing the Nymboida Power Station'. If the Commonwealth, New South Wales and Queensland governments were not interested, then they should leave the way open for private investors.¹⁶⁴ During 1949, Page succeeded in having councils form a 'Federation of all Electrical Supply and Distribution Bodies of the North Coast and Tablelands'.¹⁶⁵ 'A combined organisation, fully representative of the north', he said, could prevent the Commonwealth from using defence powers to bypass local government, as it had with the Snowy.¹⁶⁶ Yet lack of local government unity was impeding progress: councils failed to grasp that investment ought to be 'well ahead of immediate consumption demand' and that 'the economics of water power development schemes tend to improve with larger schemes'.¹⁶⁷

Page continued his efforts at the national level. In 1949, he began openly criticising the Snowy, predicting that its steep slopes would cause such complications that the Clarence or even the Burdekin would be quicker to start generating power.¹⁶⁸ Page also continued to harry the

163 Earle Page, *Clarence Water-Power Development, The Bulletin Newspaper*, Sydney, 1947, pp. 3, 23.

164 Page to 'Council Clerk' (evidently an identical letter to all relevant councils), 14 July 1948, EPP, folder 2099.

165 'Northern Rivers Association of Municipalities & Shires Minutes of Conference Held at Lismore on Friday the 22nd April 1949, to Discuss and Consider Means of Expediting Completion of Survey, Investigation and Design of Proposed Clarence Gorge Hydro-Electric Scheme', EPP, folder 2099.

166 'Statement by Sir Earle Page at Conference of North Coast Local Governing Bodies Held at Lismore 22nd April 1949', EPP, folder 2102.

167 Statement by Page, 24 April 1949, EPP, folder 2083.

168 Statement by Page, 1 July 1949, reported in the Canberra Letter of The Associated Chambers of Manufacturers of Australia, EPP, folder 401.

Department of Post-War Reconstruction to the point that its director of regional development proposed formally asking him to desist from public statements suggesting the Commonwealth was an active participant in the Technical Committee.¹⁶⁹ The director-general of the department, now Allen Brown, commented that New South Wales 'has never appeared to be over-enthusiastic about pressing on with the investigations', especially as much of the project's benefit would go to Queensland. Another member of the department concluded that there was an assured market only for 50,000 kW for Queensland and about 5,000–10,000 kW for northern New South Wales, well short of Page's claimed 125,000 kW.¹⁷⁰ The president of the Institution of Engineers assailed misconceptions about the TVA and the availability of water in Australia as the ideas of 'ill-informed visionaries'.¹⁷¹

Amid this widespread scepticism and state government indifference, the fact that the Chifley Government never decisively rejected The Gorge proposal constitutes a success of sorts for Page. The prime minister continued to correspond with him well into 1949, reminding Page that state government support was essential and also asking New South Wales about the progress of the Technical Committee.¹⁷² As late as July 1949 the director-general of Post-War Reconstruction wrote to his counterpart at Works and Housing recounting how earlier Commonwealth interest in the Clarence had been dampened by preference for the Snowy and 'the usual Treasury influence'. He suggested it be revived, partly as it might produce far more power than even Page thought and as water power was 'so limited in Australia we should be concerned to see that the maximum use is made of it'.¹⁷³ This led to a one-week field study in August 1949 by a Works and Housing engineer who, despite having been accompanied by Page throughout, produced another inconclusive report duly noting the Clarence's 'very large power potential' and calling for further investigation.¹⁷⁴

169 C.R. Lambert, minute of 6 May 1949, NAA, A9816, 1944/487 PART 1. On Commonwealth inquiries with NSW, see for example Premier McGirr to Chifley, 24 November 1949, NAA, A9816, 1944/487 PART 2.

170 A.S. Brown, minute 'Clarence River Gorge Hydro-Electric Scheme', 3 June 1949, NAA, A461, AK423/1/1; T. Langford-Smith, 26 May 1949, NAA, A461, AK423/1/1.

171 William Nimmo in *The Journal of the Institution of Engineers, Australia*, no. 3, 1949, p. 29, copy in EPP, folder 1758.

172 Chifley to Page, 24 June 1949 and 18 July 1949, EPP, folder 2087.

173 A.S. Brown to L.F. Loder, 1 July 1949, NAA, A9816, 1944/487 PART 2.

174 Report by E.F. Rowntree, finalised October 1949, copy at EPP, folder 1077.

Page's doggedness in promoting the Clarence reflects the difficulties he faced in a policy climate that favoured so many precepts he had long nurtured but in political circumstances, which stood in the way of the major role he craved. He was pushed out to the margins by the irresistible pressures of party politics, a changed policy-making culture, and a growing isolation from colleagues in conservative politics that had been discernible in the 1930s and became more obvious post-war. Yet he remained the most outspoken non-Labor advocate of the possibilities of post-war reconstruction and of the spatial and rural-orientated perspectives he had long added to so many issues. His lobbying for causes by whatever means came to hand – via state governments, the press, intellectual policy groups and directly to federal ministers – gave him a continued major public and political profile. Although unable directly to determine policy, his tireless efforts to guide post-war reconstruction's engagement with federalism, regionalism, education and particularly hydroelectricity marked his distinctiveness and could at times still induce governments to respond to such sheer persistence. At the end of the 1940s, and of the life of the federal Labor Government, Page remained undeterred and looked forward to the advent of a new conservative regime as a chance to restore his own fortunes and advance those of his country.

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