

Earle Christmas Grafton Page

Earle Page was born in Grafton, on the northern coast of New South Wales, in 1880.

After training at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Page began practising as a house surgeon in Sydney but soon returned to Grafton and began private practice in 1902. He brought many of the revolutionary advances he had witnessed in Sydney back home. Page owned the first car in the district (to act as an ambulance), connected his surgery to the telephone and used a battery operated X-ray machine.

In 1908 Page embarked on a second career as the owner of several dairy farms and a sawmill. His experiences motivated him to lead the cry that the "Sydney Octopus" was depriving rural Australia of its dues and in 1919 he successfully contested the seat of Cowper in the federal election as a representative of the Farmers and Settlers' Association.

Page, with 10 other rural Members of Parliament, formed the Country Party in 1920 and was elected as leader in 1921. The Country Party championed policies such as the abolition of tariffs and protection of secondary industry, the encouragement of migration and federal spending on regional development.

Page arranged a coalition between his party and the Nationalist Party, with the condition the Nationalists replaced their leader, Billy Hughes, with Stanley Bruce - an importer more sympathetic to cutting tariffs and the general stance of the Country Party. Page was to become Deputy Prime Minister and Treasurer of this Bruce-Page Government from 1923-1929.

During this time Page's priority was using federal funding to fund the building of roads, which fall under the jurisdiction of the states. He achieved this through extending section 96 grants - tying the money given to states to programs specified by the Commonwealth.

After the 1931 election, the new United Australia Party (UAP) refused an alliance with the Country Party due to the UAP's high protection policies, however after Labour gained seats in 1934, the UAP formed a coalition with the Country Party and Page became Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Commerce.

Page was knighted for his contribution to politics in 1938. When Joseph Lyons, the UAP leader died, Page was sworn in as Prime Minister until Robert Menzies was chosen to take over. Political differences between Page and Menzies saw the Country Party excluded from Menzies' first government and Page resigned as leader of the Country Party.

In June 1940 Page returned to Menzies' cabinet as Minister for Commerce, and later as Minister for Health (1949-1956) where he established the free milk for school children scheme, subsidised beds for hospitals, tax concessions for voluntary contributions to health funds, and free essential drugs for pensioners and then for all Australians.

In 1956, aged 76, Page stepped down from Federal Cabinet to become a backbencher. Sir Earle Page died in 1961.