

A GREAT AUSTRALIAN

Address by

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The Rt Hon. Sir Earle Page, GCMG, CH, MB, Ch.M.(Syd), FRACS.

**Let us now praise famous men,
and our fathers that begat us.**

Ecclesiasticus, xliv, 1.

The Australian Federation is ninety years old. The legacies of such diverse political leaders as Bruce, Lyons, Menzies, Fadden, Curtin and Chifley continue to exert a profound influence on contemporary Australia. Likewise, Sir Earle Page was a major influence in the public life of the nation for more than 40 years. His achievements run like a golden thread throughout the political, social, medical and economic history of this nation.

Consider, for example, Sir Earle's Parliamentary career, for which he is best remembered. It comprised 42 years of service as the Member for Cowper in the House of Representatives in the interest of the Country Party - a length of service only exceeded by the redoubtable Billy Hughes, his Parliamentary contemporary. During these four decades of Parliamentary service, there were 20 Ministries led by 10 Prime Ministers. Sir Earle served in eight of these Ministries. He also served as Australian Minister to Winston Churchill's Imperial War Cabinet while simultaneously sitting on the parliamentary Opposition benches.

It is a mark of the regard in which he was held by his political opponents in the Labor Party that Prime Minister Curtin offered Sir Earle, on his own initiative, a Ministry in the Australian War Cabinet upon his return from London. While Sir Earle declined this singular honour, he was co-opted, at Curtin's insistence, to attend Cabinet meetings throughout much of the Second World War.

The honours and responsibilities accorded him during his Parliamentary life included his election as Leader of the Country Party and his commission as Minister for Health for eight years. He was Minister for Commerce for seven years and Commonwealth Treasurer for six years. For 10 years he was Deputy Prime Minister and he served briefly as Prime Minister.

His policy achievements included the introduction of Australia's first national health scheme, the uniform taxation system, the first central bank system, the Loans Council, pioneering the privatisation of government enterprises, establishing the system of rural credits, uniform bankruptcy laws, the National Debt Commission, Australian Standards Association and helping to found and provide a sustained financial base for the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research - forerunner of the CSIRO. On the international stage, Sir Earle achieved dramatic breakthroughs in trade liberalisation and the reduction of artificial trade barriers within the Empire and Commonwealth.

A Parliamentary career of such distinction and lasting achievement would be enough to warrant serious consideration and respect by succeeding generations. However, Sir Earle also had distinguished parallel careers in medicine, education, agriculture and decentralised development. His activities in these included being one of the founders of the University College at Armidale, later The University of New England, Australia's first rural university. He was foundation chairman and Chancellor for more than 20 years.

I belong to a generation which could not know Sir Earle personally. I know him only through the legacy of his achievements, the historical record of his times and by repute.

However, I believe some of the influences on Sir Earle's later career can be easily identified. He was raised on the Clarence at a time when there were no road or rail links connecting the district with either Sydney or Brisbane and sea access was limited because of a rock bar across part of the navigable mouth of the river. This world was isolated from the outside, yet totally subject to the whims of decision-makers in government or business in Sydney, or even London. To be educated he had to leave home at the age of 10 to attend Sydney Boys' High School, from whence he matriculated to the Faculty of Medicine within The University of Sydney at the age of 15 years. He, therefore, had an intimate understanding of, and experienced from the earliest age, the difficulties faced by the many people who did not reside in Australia's urban areas.

One of the strongest themes discernible through Sir Earle's career was his determination to seek solutions to these and other peculiarly Australian problems. Further, he had a great faith in the commonsense and the integrity of the community at large and relied on this in tackling the problems he experienced in government

Whether Sir Earle was promoting the diversion of the waters of the Clarence across the Great Dividing Range, or improved health, transport and education services in country areas, or voicing the necessity for new states within the Federation or reform to promote increased national development and growth, he was advocating a national vision for Australia and practical policies in which all Australians could share and believe. He also maintained throughout his life an

open mind which was intellectually versatile and sought new and improved solutions to the difficulties of the day.

In these days of regrettably little, principled political leadership, it behoves everyone interested in public affairs to think again of the principles which drove Sir Earle Page. The frequent betrayal of both principle and the public interest which occurs so regularly today would cause him distress and anguish. His political heirs should again say loudly and tenaciously "y'see, y'see".

The distinguished Canadian newspaperman and Minister, Lord Beaverbrook, said of Sir Earle:

"What a magnificent impression he made on me! Courageous, confident and with a point of view clear-cut and expressed with vigor, he was completely Australian in his approach to the anxious problems of those days ... Page is a man who combines in a unique way the imperial outlook and the national. How few statesmen have his breadth of view - and how important it is that men of his calibre should raise their voices in public life. He always reminded me of Abraham Lincoln."

Tonight we honour the memory of a great man, the Right Honourable Sir Earle Page, G.C.M.G., C.H., M.B., Ch.M. (Sydney), F.R.A.C.S., F.R.C.S. (Hon.), D.Sc. (Hon. Syd.). Let us indeed praise a famous man!