

STATESMAN, HUMANITARIAN, PATRIOT

Address by

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Earle Christmas Grafton Page - surgeon, businessman and politician - was born, not on Christmas Day, but on August 8, 1880, at Grafton, NSW, the fifth of 11 children.

His grandfather, James Page, was an analytical chemist who experimented on himself. He was also an educationalist who spoke seven languages and, among other things, set up the first school on the north coast of New South Wales.

Earle Page's father, Charles, was a coach-builder who became Mayor of Grafton but suffered great financial loss in the crash of 1893 which left the family in desperate financial straits.

Despite the lack of money in the Page household, Earle and his brothers and sisters were very fortunate in having in their mother, Mary, a quite remarkable woman. She was intelligent, courageous and well-informed, despite the fact she married at an early age and raised a family of eight sons and three daughters.

Of Charles and Mary's eight sons, two became doctors, two were mechanical engineers, two were teachers, one was a Methodist missionary and later chaplain and adviser to the King and Queen of Tonga, and one was a civil servant who became the deputy administrator of Papua New Guinea. So Earle was one of a number in his immediate family who made a special contribution.

An accident involving damage to his mother's eye and the subsequent long and expensive trip from Grafton to Sydney for treatment which, in the end, yielded no result, are generally regarded as the main reasons young Earle Page wanted to become a doctor. He simply wanted people in Grafton to have access to proper health care - care which he saw first-hand was not available to his mother when she needed it.

Because his family was poor, he realised that if he were to become a doctor he would have to do so off his own bat. He had discovered that, to become a doctor, he would need to win the Struth Exhibition (or scholarship). That was about as likely as winning the lottery. It was offered only once every five years and went exclusively to the university undergraduate who topped first-year Arts in the appropriate year. To have a chance at winning the Exhibition, therefore, young Page was first required to pass his Leaving Certificate and the matriculation examination to the university.

In 1894, at the tender age of 14, he determined to have a go at both examinations. His family was able to rake up the three pounds and three shillings required from each student sitting for the matriculation, but it could not find the additional one pound ten shillings if the boy wished to sit for the Leaving, which was also conducted by the university. In desperation, the family offered the Sydney University three tons of potatoes worth 10 shillings a ton, or the equivalent in corn.

In short, he won the Struth Exhibition and he went on to graduate in medicine from Sydney University at the top of his year by the age of 21 - an unprecedented and subsequently unequalled achievement.

Soon after, as a young pathologist at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, he faced death from an infection caught while performing an autopsy - in the days before surgeons wore rubber gloves. No one gave him a chance except the assistant superintendent who opened up his arms in 40 places. The patient refused an anaesthetic because, as he said, he wanted to make sure the surgeon "would cut deep enough to give me a chance of recovery".

Describing afterwards his brush with death, Earle Page wrote:

"In this way, I was not only reprieved but I gained an enduring philosophy. Having been regarded by everyone, myself included, as a hopeless case for three days, I lost all fear of death.

"This incident, confirmed by wartime observations, convinced me that fatal injury is indeed fatal, and death the inexorable fruit of one's predetermined fate. On this belief, I have made certain ever since to do as much each day as I could, for no one can be sure of what tomorrow may bring".

Soon after his brush with death, he decided to set up practice in Grafton. The way of the prophet, however, has never been easy and the youthful Dr Page's enthusiasm for modern medicine and surgery was opposed by Grafton doctor colleagues. They objected to new abdominal surgery and he was forced to operate on a patient in a large room in his mother's house. As a matter of courtesy - and as a contribution to their education - he invited all local doctors to observe the operation, which was new to them.

The principal objector remained at the operation table until the belly was being sewn up, then left on his normal rounds. "The patient is sure to die at any minute", he told the waiting crowd. "Page has removed all her insides". The patient made a complete recovery and lived for many years in health and comfort.

Young Dr Page, with a much enhanced reputation, soon had sufficient capital to build a 13bed private hospital. He installed as matron a nurse he had met in unusual circumstances, by accidentally setting fire to her during an earlier operation at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, and who he was later to marry.

He imported the then novel X-ray equipment and performed many daring and successful operations. Sydney colleagues judged him among the best surgeons of his generation. The Page Chest Pavilion is named after him.

An expanded practice and poor roads meant it often took days to reach a patient and so, in 1904, he acquired the first car to be brought to the north coast of New South Wales.

I am dwelling on these early years because I believe they were very important in influencing Earle Page's later career and achievements. He was born into a family with a tradition and commitment to public service. He enhanced that tradition, which is still alive today.

After service with the Army Medical Corps in Egypt and at the French front as a surgeon during World War 1, he returned to Grafton, became involved in local politics and nominated for the federal seat of Cowper as an "independent straight-out country" candidate. He soon received Farmers and Settlers' Association endorsement and was elected in 1919, at the age of 39.

Public affairs in Australia might have run a very different course had young Dr Page perished in the pre-antibiotic age, or even if he had stuck to his medical practice at Grafton. A truant from his profession, he became a master practitioner of the political art, matching swords with giants such as Hughes and Menzies. He broke and fashioned governments; made the weakling Country Party a vital force; was probably the most influential political figure in Australian politics as Deputy Prime Minister in the 1920s and 1930s; rose briefly to the Prime Ministership; and in or out of office, exerted a powerful influence on national events during a whole generation. Intriguing, bursting with energy and brimming with ideas, "Doc" Page was a unique figure in federal politics.

In different circumstances, with his tremendous drive and ability, he might have become Prime Minister for a much longer period. However, dedication to a minority party bent on redressing the imbalance between country and city was a career handicap, but it was one he was happy to bear.

It would take me much longer to do justice to Earle Page's political achievements during a parliamentary career spanning 42 years, many of those as a senior minister. They are a matter of public record and many here are well aware of his contribution. I shall draw briefly, however, on a speech made by a one-time political antagonist, Sir Robert Menzies, who said of him:

"Sir Earle Page's public career was a very remarkable one. Few men have served Australia with such distinction in so many ways over so long a period of time. It is a difficult task to select the outstanding features of the versatile work he did, but perhaps I might venture to refer briefly to three of a number of matters which should be on the record. The first is that, conscious of the need for strengthening the rural economy, he was largely responsible for many taxation and other provisions designed to encourage capital improvement on the land and with it the essential improvement of efficiency and production. The second is that, as Commonwealth Treasurer, he was a leader in the formation of the financial agreement and the establishment of the Australian Loan Council, each of which has had a permanent and far-reaching effect upon the financial relations of the Commonwealth with the States. The third is that he was the prime author of, and the driving force behind, the Commonwealth medical and health schemes which are now successfully operating in Australia." (That was preMedibank.)

I would like to add another achievement that has given enduring benefits to the people of northern New South Wales - namely, his support for rural education, especially tertiary education.

After a long battle to have a rural university established in New South Wales and just prior to his appointment as the first Chancellor of The University of New England at Armidale, Page said on April 22, 1959, in the Federal Parliament:

"It is a labour of love, surely, to ensure that people learn, first, to read and write, and then that those who are scientifically and culturally inclined receive further training so that we all may get the best out of life. In fact, our very safety depends upon it. In my view, it is absolutely essential that we should make certain that all our young people, who have sufficient brainpower, have an opportunity of being trained. If our educational system is not decentralised, it will be difficult to know how many potentially valuable youngsters are lost in the general muddle. We will not know how many first-class minds we may be able to rescue."

The life of Earle Page is testimony to the accuracy of those thoughts. It would give Earle Page immense pleasure to know that his beloved north coast of New South Wales, as from next year, will be served by a stand-alone university - the Southern Cross University - and that one of his grandsons is serving on its interim council.

I have tried to paint a brief picture of Earle Page, the man and what motivated him; his early life of struggle and concern for others, especially country people who he believed were greatly disadvantaged in terms of opportunity; his bubbling enthusiasm and fertile mind, producing one new idea after another; and his great love of medicine and the importance of education.

He touched many people in his long and productive life and he has certainly been a source of inspiration to me. To conclude, I draw on a comment from David Drummond, a political colleague, who worked with Page on a number of important projects during their respective careers. Drummond said: -

"I pass on now to what I think was one of his greatest qualities. I refer to the natural and deep humility of mind which always marks the truly great. I could see no difference between the way he met me as an apostle, an evangelist of his political ideas 40-odd years ago, and the manner in which he met me right up to the end of his career when almost every honour that can be heaped upon a public man had reached him. He had that humility of mind which marks the real and intellectually great. Because of what he knew, he understood what a fragment it was of the mighty knowledge which lies beyond human comprehension. He was a statesman, humanitarian and patriot."

I believe it is important we do not forget great Australians such as Earle Page who have served the public well. Their example is a beacon for us all.