

Address by

Rt Hon Sir Zelman Cowen, AK, GCMG, GCVO, QC, DCL

on the occasion of

Sir Earle Page Memorial Trust

25 September, 1996

“University Education and Policies”

This oration honours the life and achievements of an eminent Australian who at the cost of his professional calling as a surgeon – his autobiography is titled *Truant Surgeon* – served Australia for a long period in the political sphere. Sir Earle Page was a member of the Australian Commonwealth parliament from 1919 to 1961, and in the course of this time was briefly Prime Minister, for a much longer period Deputy Prime Minister, and the holder of various ministerial portfolios. He was a leader of the Country (later, after his death the National) Party, and he played a leading role in its foundation.

Sir Earle Page had a long continuing interest in education, and particularly in its availability to students outside the capital cities and large concentrations of population. In a speech early in the post war years, he declared that "*if the 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.*" He had a long association with the project which ultimately became the University of New England. When funds were solicited to establish a University College in Armidale in the 1930s, Earle Page was a contributor at a time when the North Coast, whatever it thought of the project, was unwilling to put its hand in its pockets for it. When the College was established in 1938 as a College of The University of Sydney, he became the Chairman of the Advisory Council and, when the College in turn became the autonomous University of New England in 1954, he became its first Chancellor until 1961. His portrait in the robes of his Office hangs in Booloominbah, the great house designed by Horbury Hunt for Frederick White. This house came as a gift to the University College in 1938, and was for some time effectively the College and the centre of its activities. At a later time, one of the residential colleges built on the University site was named for Earle Page, and has served to preserve the memory of his association with and contribution to the University.

The University's existence and location owed much to an enduring New England movement in support of a new State which Page strongly supported. As Bruce Mitchell writes in his excellent and splendidly illustrated book *House on the Hill*, the idea that the northern part of New South Wales should have its own University was seriously supported as far back as 1920 as an element in the enthusiastic campaign for a New State launched in that year. The region had a strong sense of separateness from the political centre in Sydney, and Armidale had long been an administrative centre of the New England region. As Phillip Wright, who was the second Chancellor of the University and a stalwart supporter of the New England New State movement over many years,

wrote in his *Memories of a Bushwacker*, the University was for this reason seen as providing for and having a special interest in matters of rural interest.

The story of the achievement of the University College is a fascinating one. T.R. Forster, a New England grazier and a son-in-law of Frederick White of Booloominbah, offered the house, which was no longer required to serve as a private residence for the family, for use as a University College provided that a sum of the order of £10,000 could be raised from the community sources to support the project. Even so, the money came in very slowly, but at the end it was achieved (with Earle Page as a contributor), and the State Government honoured the commitment to establish the College in 1938.

A Warden, Dr Edgar Booth, a physicist on the academic staff of the University of Sydney, was appointed as the first Warden of the College, and a small lecturing staff was appointed to the College which attracted a small body of students of good quality, a number of whom attained positions of distinction. The war years, which immediately followed, inhibited growth, and there was a time when the continued existence of the College was threatened. Booth effectively protected its existence, and at the war's end in 1945 resigned as Warden and was succeeded by R.B., later Sir Robert, Madgwick, a University of Sydney lecturer in economics who took up appointment in 1947. In the war years, he headed the Australian Army Education Service. He had an expansive view of education which should be more responsive to the needs of the entire population, adults as well as children, directed to the end that education should be an effective agent to serve and to change society. So he encouraged the role of the university in developing teaching and research in areas in which it rapidly attained a reputation, external studies and adult education, particularly. As well, he was supportive of disciplines relevant to the University's location such as rural science and agricultural economics.

Over the years in which the College continued as a College of The University of Sydney, there was friction in the relationship between the mother University and its College. Sydney wanted to restrict the teaching role of Armidale to the early years of courses; Sydney likewise had little interest in developments in special fields. The role of the University College in the development of external studies was not encouraged; the university's efforts in this area were not seen as an appropriate university function. Likewise, adult education was questioned as a university activity. It grew clearer that the future course should be that of separation, with the College attaining an autonomous

existence, though haste in moving to this conclusion was generally deprecated. The decision was taken, however, in 1953 to create a new independent University of New England which came into existence in 1954. Growth was at first slow, but expansion of staff, including the professorial level, proceeded. Faculties of Rural Science and Agricultural Economics, and Chairs in these fields were created and filled with very good appointments. The sixties saw significant growth in students and staff numbers; there was substantial building activity and marked progress in many fields. It was late in 1965 that I received a letter from the Chancellor, Phillip Wright, who had succeeded Earle Page as Chancellor in 1961. The letter advised of the impending retirement of Sir Robert Madgwick as Vice-Chancellor, and enquired whether I would be interested in the appointment. I had been Dean and Professor of Law in The University of Melbourne since 1951, and I was disposed to consider an appropriate opportunity for change. I had certainly not thought to be a Vice-Chancellor. I replied that I was interested, and over an extended period of months interest turned into acceptance. I have to tell that when I accepted, my wife and I had spent one short day in the University. Looking back, what attracted me immediately was the special character of the University as a residential University. I knew something of such Universities from Oxford where I had spent some years as student and College Fellow; I know of Universities with a nation-wide student body in the United States. Perhaps I allowed myself to dream of such a possibility in New England, and while there are special faculties – Rural Science and Agricultural Economics – which because of their distinctiveness attracted a more widely spread student body, it became very clear that this was not an attainable future for New England. It is not generally speaking, and certainly at under-graduate level, the Australian way; a low degree of mobility of students between Universities persists.

I learned, however, pretty quickly that the University had a strong community commitment. I saw a distinctive illustration of that in my first days on the campus early in January 1967. As we drove to our new home, the University site was alive with painters, musicians, writers and a variety of people attending a range of summer schools. I was not used to a university vigorously alive in hot early January days. It was exciting and stimulating, and it was a regular feature of New England University activity. It was directed by University staff with specific interest in Adult Education who were highly expert in the organisation of such programs. It was said by way of criticism that much of what was offered had little to do with regular University fare, and that, apart from the people I have referred to, those participating had no other involvement with traditional University activities, at least in Armidale. We ran smaller scale operations broadly of this character in other parts of the region. In the

years in which I was in New England, I visited surrounding areas and centres in Tamworth, in Lismore, in Grafton; I recall that I went to discuss the possibilities of establishing an office in Port Macquarie. Our officers in these areas provided a University presence: they organised programs, classes and activities, drawing upon available skills and resources. All in all, these programs and this organisation gave effective expression to what Madgwick envisaged as an expansive role for Universities in carrying education to adults as well as to those of traditional University ages.

I reflect also on activities in the field of External Studies. I came from Melbourne University where they were not much esteemed; they were indeed not well regarded in most Universities in Australia. It happened that I learned about External Studies in the two Universities in which I served as Vice-Chancellor: in New England and in the University of Queensland. I learned not only from reports and printed pages; in both places I travelled extensively in the course of visits to centres, and I talked with people who as external studies students came to the University of New England for residential courses which they were required to attend. Indeed, in Queensland I took the initiative in building two External Studies Centres, in Toowoomba and Cairns.

There were two External Studies systems, exemplified by Queensland and New England. The older system, that of Queensland, staffed teaching departments on the basis that teachers were responsible for external studies or internal studies exclusively. This in general worked disadvantageously for external teachers who tended to be viewed as lower on the pecking order than their internal colleagues. In New England, certainly as things developed, teachers in those fields in which external studies were offered were responsible for the teaching both of internal and external students. This had the great merit of allowing a number of departments to establish themselves strongly as internal departments. Without the support of quite large external enrolments the slower growing internal student bodies would never have supported this growth. And then the existence of strong, well staffed, internal students in turn attracted external students. One of my most vivid memories of New England is of the lively external study schools, of short duration, which all external students were required to attend. To this Vice-Chancellor, dropping in on these classes, there remains a vivid remembrance of mature articulate students, who having lived laborious nights with their assignments and studies, responded eagerly to the opportunity to meet with their teachers and their fellow students, and welcomed enthusiastically the opportunity to spend time in the University.

Above all, my memory of external studies in New England is bound up with the superb organising talents of its director of my time, the late Howard Sheath. The key to a successful External Studies program is enthusiastic and yet meticulous administration; a determination to overcome all of the formidable difficulties associated with a program. Howard Sheath's capacities were first rate and he brought a strong and unyielding commitment to the tasks. It was not surprising when the Open University was being planned in England that Howard Sheath was invited to contribute his Australian experience, and he was an advisor as other programs of external studies were devised in various parts of the world. External Studies, distance learning programs, are now of great and growing significance world wide, and the programs and materials which are prepared and used have a high degree of sophistication. Since my time, the development of External Studies and distance programs in Australia have seriously diminished New England's position as a provider, and this may have serious implications for a University in an area from which it drew significant strength.

One remembrance remains vivid with External Studies in New England in my days. My first graduation ceremony in New England as Vice-Chancellor was in 1967. It was, they were memorable occasions, because of the marvellous natural setting on the Booloominbah lawn, and because of the distinctive character of the occasions as family events. So many of the graduates were "externals" who had lived laborious days and nights working for their degrees, and who had perforce to deny themselves many of the pleasures of family life and leisure. On graduation day at "Bool" they could celebrate both achievement and release, and what is more, celebrate with their families.

The programs of external studies which such Universities as New England devised and inspired were in the first place a response to the demands for qualifications for teachers and others who could not satisfy those requirements by attendance as internal students. More broadly, they were a response to the proposition which Margaret Mead writing in 1963 called *"the most vivid truth of the new age."* This was, and I quote her words, that *"noone will live all his life in the world into which he was born, and noone will die in the world in which he worked in his maturity. For those who work on the growing edges of science, technology or the arts, contemporary life changes at even shorter intervals. Often only a few months may elapse before something which was easily taken for granted must be unlearned or transformed to fit the new state of knowledge or practice. In this world noone"* said Margaret Mead, *"can complete an education."*

I reflect on many aspects of the life of the University of New England, and a volume of essays and reminiscences published in 1987 and edited by the late Margaret Franklin called *The New England Experience* brings back to mind developments over the fifty years of the life of the institution since it was born as a University College in 1938. Peter Wright, one of the sons of the second Chancellor, tells of community response to major rural problems, and the way in which the University became involved in the study of such problems. The concern was a recurring one in rural Australia: water and drought. Peter Wright tells the story:

A group saw what we felt was a need for the University to extend its pioneering enterprise this time in the field of water research and management. We were encouraged by Professor Larry Harrington and a proposal was submitted to the Vice-Chancellor Zelman Cowen for the establishment of a Faculty of Hydrology. He gave enthusiastic support and gained also that of the University Council. An appeal to the community for the establishment of funds produced about £7,000. In the event the concept was broadened to include also study and research in land and wild life management. In this form, the support of the Universities' Commission was obtained and the School of Natural Resources came into being with Professor John Burton as Head of the School. Subsequently, the nearby property Newholme was acquired for use as a field study centre for the School and the School became the Faculty of Resource Management.

Reading this reminiscence, I was reminded of the events. After my appointment but before I took it up, I received a letter from Peter Wright, a grazier devoted with all his family to the welfare of the region and aware of the value of the University in putting science and knowledge into the service of the resolution of major problems. He asked that I take part in the discussions on ways and means to contribute scientific analysis and knowledge to the resolution of great problems. And Peter Wright shows how the group's discussions widened the definition of the problem, so that it became a comprehensive study of environmental issues. It was my first engagement with the study of such issues, and it was surprisingly free of the clouding emotion which surrounds much of environmental debate. With its concerns, it brought into being a Faculty which was established not long after I left the University. I remember – or at least I think that I remember – Professor McClymont, Dean of Veterinary Science, speaking about ecosystems. I would wait until I could relieve myself of my ignorance by looking up ecosystems in

the dictionary; then I would forget again and go back for enlightenment once more. Silly it sounds, but it is true. The University of New England was a trail blazer in this area.

I remember the University's attempt to secure authority to establish a Faculty of Veterinary Science. We had Rural Science which, as Bill McClymont tells in the volume, was directed to a fundamental understanding of the basis of agriculture – farms as soils, plants, and for animal, economic and people complexes – with no specialisation. The aim was to produce graduates who would be able to approach farm problems in research, extension, industry or as producers without bias to particular components or disciplines, who could communicate with and interpret the advice of specialists; and be able to specialize in a wide range of fields by career choice or post graduate training. In about the middle of my term, the prospect of a Veterinary course came up. Because of costs, a University could only offer Veterinary Science if it had specific authority to do so. It happened that, about midway through my term as Vice-Chancellor, a decision was taken at government level to add another Veterinary School to those presently existing. New England responded enthusiastically: this was a professional school for the design and operation of which we were well suited. We presented our case to the specialist Committee appointed to make recommendations to the Universities Commission and we were given endorsement, and the Universities Commission itself recommended New England. Scientific excellence was one thing, politics another, and the government decided that a Western Australian University should have the prize. As a one time historian, I could only comment by quoting the words of Lord Melbourne, "*Let's have no damn nonsense about merit.*"

Someone unkindly wrote that I saw the appointment in New England as a stepping stone. It isn't true in the sense that having become a Vice-Chancellor I would never have thought to make application for a larger one in another Australian University. When I knew that the Vice-Chancellorship of Queensland was vacant, I thought that it would be a great challenge, but it was not for me to seek it. I had liked what I saw of the University and the State; the University was large, urban and with a wide range of professional faculties. It happened that one day in the latter part of 1969, a telephone call came from a member of the Selection Committee for the Queensland Vice-Chancellorship asking if I would be interested. To that I answered affirmatively, and I was in due course offered the appointment. I saw that as quite different from application. In any event, I went into what was at that time a cauldron full of troubles and revolt. We lived through that to emerge into good days,

and from there I went to the Governor-Generalship and finally to Oxford to be Head of the College I had left more than three decades earlier. And I like to think that I gave New England all the commitment, effort and imagination I could muster.

As Governor-General, I came to the University of New England to speak at a graduation and to receive an honorary degree, and I was very pleased to revisit old sites, to see familiar faces and evidence of much development. Since that time the waters on which the University has sailed have not all been calm. In the new world of university amalgamations, New England has been amalgamated with Northern Rivers and subsequently de-amalgamated. Out of that has come a new University in Lismore in Northern New South Wales. That is an area of growth, while New England is not. How two independent Universities in the areas with differing population bases will carry on, it is not yet clear to see, and New England suffered from the experience of sorting out claims and entitlements when the amalgamation was reversed. Though I do not certainly know the situation, it is not a comfortable one.

I have taken as my theme for this Earle Page Oration this brief discussion of New England and its University in our respective times. It touched us both, and we both hopefully made our contributions to its life. Both of us were happy to do so.

I salute the achievement of Earle Page and I honour his memory.

Rt Hon Sir Zelman Cowen
