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LIBRARY LECTURE: Earle Page—*Now is the Psychological Moment*

Presented by Dr Stephen Wilks, Parliament House, Canberra on 24 February 2021

Why don't I be annoying and start with a question: who was the first national parliamentary leader of the Federal Country Party? It was William McWilliams from Tasmania, party leader 1920–21. I didn't know myself when I started my researches back in 2009.

But it was Earle Page who ensured the Country Party's future. He was intelligent and a great ideas man, yet perceptions of him are dominated by his 1939 attack on Robert Menzies.

First, let's set the scene with a few basics about Earle Christmas Grafton Page. He was born in 1880 in Grafton in north-eastern New South Wales. He was a rural surgeon who helped found the Federal Country Party and was its parliamentary leader from 1921 to 1939. Page's membership of the House of Representatives from 1919 until his death in 1961 makes him Australia's third longest serving Federal parliamentarian after Billy Hughes and Philip Ruddock.

He was *de facto* deputy prime minister under Stanley Bruce (1923–29) and Joseph Lyons (1934–39). He held the portfolios of treasury (1923–29), commerce (1934–39, 1940–41) and health (1937–38), but then spent time on the political outer before returning to the health portfolio (1949–56). In 1941–42 he served as Australian minister resident in London, with a place in Churchill's cabinet.

Page was even briefly prime minister. This was for a mere nineteen days on a caretaker basis in April 1939 following the death in office of Lyons, but nonetheless accords him a certain cachet he would not otherwise have.

All this said, the interest in this figure is not just a matter of a politico who hung around for a long while. I will explain!

20 April 1939

Let me turn to what Earle Page is best known for today—his notorious parliamentary attack of 20 April 1939 on Robert Menzies for his not having joined the First AIF. Page was then caretaker prime minister, and was about to hand the reins to Menzies, who had just been selected as leader by the party room of the United Australia Party.

Page liked to be seen to be clever, and this is reflected in the way he structured his speech. He organised his attack as so (and here I paraphrase): 24 days ago Menzies had resigned from Lyons's cabinet over the government's failure to introduce a national insurance scheme: and 24 weeks ago he made a speech on leadership widely interpreted as a veiled attack on his prime minister, Joe Lyons.

And then the notorious punch line—in Page's words this time:

> when, 24 years ago, Australia was in the midst of the Gallipoli campaign, Mr Menzies was a member of the Australian military forces, and held the king's commission. In 1915, after being in the service for some years, he resigned his commission and did not go overseas. I am not questioning the reasons why anyone did not go to the war. All I say is that if the right honourable gentleman cannot satisfactorily and publicly explain to a very great body of people in Australia who did participate in the war his failure to do so, he will not be able to get that maximum effort out of the people in the event of war.[1]

In other words, thought Page, Menzies was of such poor character he should not succeed to the prime ministership.

Just listen to the interjections, from both sides of the House—'this is dirt'; 'this is very cheap'; 'how many Germans did you kill Doc?'; and even some Labor members shouting that they, 'did not go to the war either'. Page was drowned out. And the editorials were just as glowing, ranging from 'unedifying scene' (the Melbourne *Argus*) to 'a despicable attack' (*Sydney Morning Herald*). Page was not normally vindictive, so why did he do it?

The immediate trigger appears to have been Page's angry belief that Menzies' attacks (if such they were) had hastened the death of his friend Lyons. But note also that Menzies' leadership speech came just a few days after Page had failed in a bid to establish a national economic planning agency, an audacious venture that was very important to him yet which Menzies had disdained. In other words, Page's anger had a policy base, too. More of this also shortly.

Page was a man who invites differing reactions. Consider these comments about him. Stanley Bruce said that:

> he was full of ideas and to most of them you had to say "for god's sake go away and get your head read". But if you had the patience to listen to Page he'd come up with a helluva good idea now and then.[2]

Don Aitkin thought Page was 'without question the most inventive Federal politician of the twentieth century… [and] …the most under-regarded'.[3] But Arthur Fadden, after a few drinks at the Hotel Canberra one night in 1950, was heard to shout 'he's a dribbling, doddering old halfwit!'[4]

Well, I'm going to tell you what I think of Page. Incredibly, and conveniently for me, my book *Now is the Psychological Moment: Earle Page and the Imagining of Australia* is the first full length study of his figure, who I believe to be the most extraordinary visionary to hold high public office in twentieth-century Australia. One other thing about Page is that he keeps tossing up surprises. How many people know that the wife of a 1930s prime minister died in 2011? His second wife, Jean Page, née Thomas.

I've read claims by some historians that Page was of modest intellect. Yet his academic record was at least equal to that of Menzies. Page started his medical studies at Sydney University aged all of 15 and went on to top his graduation class. He also produced the most interesting of Australia's prime ministerial memoirs—admittedly not that strong a field—his posthumously published *Truant Surgeon* of 1963.

Another surprise came as I ploughed through Page's personal papers, most of which are held by the National Library. Page read widely, and late in his career took notes from Arnold Toynbee's massive *A Study of History* that are a telling reflection of how he saw himself. Toynbee, he said, 'points out

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[1] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 April 1939, pp. 11-2. The text in this press report is identical to that in the Melbourne *Argus*, but slightly different from the text provided by Hansard, including by incorporating many more of the interjections.

[2] Quoted in *Bruce of Melbourne: Man of Two Worlds*, by Cecil Edwards, Heinemann, London, 1965, p. 82.

[3] Don Aitkin, 'Page, Earle Christmas Grafton', in Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, pp. 488–9.

[4] Quoted in *It Strikes Me: Collected Essays 1994-2010* by Peter Ryan, Quadrant Books, Sydney 2011, p. 266.

fundamental basis of successive civilisations been saved and transmitted to posterity by virile minority' (Page's underlining).

Page used the number 24 to impart a sense of rhythm to his Menzies speech. Shortly, I'll emulate this, but scaling down to the number 6 as I do so:

- his 6 core strategies for re-shaping Australia
- 6 factors in his rapid rise to national status
- 6 reasons why Page is interesting and
- finally, 6 conclusions on this place in history. But no counting, please!

Page's ideas

It is fairly widely appreciated that Page had a major hand in creating the Federal Country Party's coalition with the urban-based conservatives, which we still have today; some basics of our Federal system, including tied Commonwealth grants to the states and the Loan Council; and also our first public health insurance scheme, back in the 1950s.

Impressive as these are, they do not capture his much wider vision. My book is essentially a study of the thought of this very bright and somewhat eccentric visionary. I have tried to make biography work harder as a contribution to the understanding of the past, with Earle Page as my means of doing so.

Page drew on many specific ideas held by civic movements and other public figures, but uniquely moulded these into a coherent vision of a radically different Australian nation—and was in a position to try to do something about this. In this, Page was one of the great Australian optimists, who saw the nation as a tractable land of possibilities. He first stated his national vision in a speech he gave in August 1917 to a national conference of rural newspaper proprietors, well before he entered national politics. Page's 6 core strategies for re-shaping Australia were, in brief:

The decentralisation of population and industry to the countryside; 'centralisation' is an 'evil', Page said simply in 1917. He was convinced that urban environments brought out the worst in people.

Linked to this was Page's regionalism. He saw the creation of new states as steps towards creating smaller Australia-wide regional structures of governance, and so tried to steer new statism towards this national agenda. On this (as on almost any given issue) Page had much broader goals than most of his peers in the Country Party. Regional governance would, he thought, bring government closer to communities and so stimulate local engagement with social and economic development, leading to national growth. But this would follow policies set by a strong 'central national government' under which, as he put it, 'men will begin to think in terms of Australia as a whole, rather than of their state'.

National economic planning of infrastructure and new industries.

Harnessing rivers for hydro-electricity as a regionally-based means of electrification to be applied across the entire countryside.

Rural-based education to encourage decentralisation and civic awareness, especially though a network of small residential universities. This also reflected his ideas about the desirable scale of institutions.

And lastly, a reformed constitution to strengthen the central government's ability to set national polices, or at least to encourage co-operation amongst otherwise warring state governments.

Note how these goals were intertwined. For example, planning was a means of developing rural infrastructure to support regionalism and decentralisation.

Now, self-proclaimed visionaries are a dime a dozen. But Page, as a long-term holder of high office, was different. He was not just trying to secure more resources for the countryside and his electorate (keen on this as he was) but wanted to re-shape all of Australia along the aforementioned decentralised and regionalised lines.

This rare combination of the earthly and the dreamer was well aware that he operated far ahead of wider political and public opinion. Hence the phrase 'now is the psychological moment' that he used over decades to signal whenever he thought the political stars had at last aligned such that he had a chance of success. He reacted to this with sudden relentless efforts establish a new state, a planning authority, a hydro-electricity plant or whatever!

Page's ideas remain hard to collectively classify using traditional concepts of liberalism, conservatism and socialism. Primarily he saw himself as a great innovator. But of course, life isn't fair, is it? Perceptions of Page are instead dominated by his attack on Menzies and his unhappy dealings with Curtin and Churchill over the deployment of the Australian 7th Division in 1942. My book examines in detail two of his more remarkable initiatives, ambitious even by Page standards. One is the 1931–2 campaign to unilaterally separate northern New South Wales from the rest of the state—Australia's greatest political conspiracy, perhaps? The other is Page's 1938–9 attempt to establish powerful machinery for national economic planning.

Page's rise

Prior to being elected to parliament in 1919, the highest public office Page had held was the mayoralty of South Grafton. Less than 18 months later, he was delighted to find himself leader of the Federal Country Party on the crossbenches and issuing demands to a formidable prime minister, Billy Hughes. By 1923 he was treasurer and leader of a party that held almost half the positions in cabinet. How so? Here are my next six!

Firstly, he entered politics at a formative time in the structure of party politics. Page rode a rise in rural-based protest and its organisation into a party political form.

Secondly, Page is associated with the celebrated rural mind-set—or perhaps ideology—dubbed 'countrymindedness'. This is a highly flexible predisposition, which could range from elements of agrarian romanticism to more forward-looking ideas on social policy such as decentralisation.[5] Countrymindedness overlapped with and supported many of Page's early ideas. He agreed that the nation depended on primary producers, and that rural pursuits brought out the best in people. But Page went well beyond this somewhat defensive concept to embrace a much wider agenda for the entire nation.

Thirdly, Page's deep involvement in the new state movement gave him a ready platform and reached a peak in the early to mid-1920s. It helped him to consolidate his home base of northern New South Wales and build relationships with a diverse group of local elites and rural activists.

Fourthly, the still formative and highly inclusive nature of the early Country Party suited Page. Someone so idiosyncratic would not have been nearly as successful within a more established party.

Fifthly, the timing of his ascendancy to cabinet minister in 1923 was good. Central to the Bruce-Page government was its taking office when post-war resurgent optimism in government circles concerning Australia's future presented it with the opportunity to reinvigorate the nation's economic development. Page added his own agenda to the government's more conventional initiatives, and so

[5] This concept was more fully delineated by Don Aitkin; see his 'Countrymindedness–The Spread of an Idea', in S.L. Goldberg and F.B. Smith (eds), *Australian Cultural History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, pp. 52–4

pursued some personal passions—the spread of hydro-electricity, new states and improvement of rural roads by tied grants to the States, all with mixed results.

Sixthly, the coalition. Page played a decisive personal role in the 1922–3 creation of a coalition between the Country Party and the ruling Nationalists. This gave him a unique standing within the party by identifying himself with a course of action that probably helped ensure his party's long-term survival.

This forging of the coalition is further affirmation of Page's determination to achieve change. He wanted to re-shape Australia, not just remain the leader of a marginal protest party.

By now you should be getting a picture of a decidedly singular individual. So, let me digress into considering what sort of a person Earle Page was.

Ulrich Ellis, journalist and tireless advocate of new states, worked with Page over decades. He portrayed Page as 'a combination of dreaming idealist and intensely practical man of affairs.' Though rarely ill, 'his longest spells in bed were the results of occasional accidents precipitated by absent-minded driving while haranguing his passengers'. Ellis added:

> if he seemed selfish or unduly demanding, he could feel that he was obeying the dictates of his destiny which impelled him to push forward regardless, and if others were discomforted, then that was their contribution to the fulfilment of the grand design.

Note particularly Ellis's comment on Page's thought processes, that hints at what was probably Page's greatest weakness:

> he applied to political problems his surgeon's facility for quick diagnosis and was apt to bridge the gap in one inspired leap, arguing backwards from the solution to the problem to justify his conclusion.[6]

Page consistently mistook himself for a rationalist, not least as he was one of the first Commonwealth ministers to be science-trained. But he was so very unshakable in his views that his commitment was clearly much more emotive and instinctive. He upheld his core ideas over decades, despite doubts about their practicality and the increasing indifference of party colleagues. Page himself attested to powerful early life influences that were the basis for his world view. One was the proud Page family tradition of community service, particularly in education, reflecting a strong commitment to Methodism. His happy upbringing in Grafton underlay his faith in small rural communities. Exposure as a young doctor to the effects of rural isolation fuelled his resentment of exclusion from what was available to urban dwellers. And his medical practice fostered an awareness of the potential of new technologies.

Why is Page so interesting?

I've already touched on Page's power to surprise. But there are some more specific reasons why he is an interesting topic for a life study.

Firstly, Page's high political status makes him of inherent interest. Most would-be nation changers who challenge convention exit the political stage with few concrete achievements to their name. Why was Page an exception who survived for decades as a party leader and minister?

Secondly, Page is that rare thing in a political biography—an unclaimed major figure rich in ideas.

Thirdly, his longevity across decades. The course of his rich career illuminates important changes in the wider policy environment around him. For example, Page lacked empathy with economic precepts

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[6] All quotes from Ulrich Ellis, *A History of the Australian Country Party*, Melbourne University Press, Parkville, Vic., 1963, pp. 100, 323, 327.

that came to dominate post-World War Two policy formulation, and his own Country Party gravitated towards a much narrower conception of national development.

Fourthly, the breadth of his vision covers much and keeps leading to new issues. I like polymaths, you get more for your money from them. Page's career covers many fundamentals in Australian history—the formation of the party system, rural protest, the ongoing struggle to settle Federalism, belief in ability to readily create new industries; everything, it seems, right down to the *Wire and Wire Netting Act 1927*.

Fifthly, the unusual distinctiveness and clarity of Page's policy vision further enhances his value as a basis for wider historical assessment. It has been said that in Australian political culture local mediators derived their ideas from European and American sources. Although Page made enthusiastic use of international exemplars, notably the Tennessee Valley Authority, this was highly selective. Fundamentally, he had his own views that synthesised a mix of home-grown and international ideas into a distinctive world view.

Sixthly, my particular interest amongst all this is in Earle Page's significance for what I call Australian developmentalism. That is, using Page as a basis for assessing the widespread impression that the Australian nation had once been committed to heroic national development initiatives.

Page's ideas about development mark him as one of many prominent Australian leaders who hailed variously from the business world and politics—figures as diverse as Ben Chifley, Thomas Playford and John McEwen—who assumed that such a vast, formative nation as Australia was surely open to the aggressive exploitation of natural resources and the fostering of primary and secondary industry to realise the nation's potential—'developmentalism.'

Sentiments that developmentalism encompasses won early prominence in Australia as an expression of national identity. The economic historian S. J. Butlin said that 'development has, as it were, always been part of Australian religion since Arthur Phillip'.[7] Donald Horne wrote of development as Australia's 'secular faith', amounting to 'a kind of patriotism'.[8] This has encompassed measures as varied as land settlement schemes, fostering of secondary industry, major infrastructure and investment in massive mining projects, right up to such unlikely proposals as the Bradfield scheme to irrigate the inland.

Studying Page's policy campaigns helps to provide a fuller understanding of developmentalism's place in the nation's history. I aimed to also capture some of what is distinctive about Australian civilization, and contribute to a deeper understanding of how Europeans tried to build a nation in a land they perceived to be a *tabula rasa*.

Page's career also casts light on a longstanding tension between assertive developmentalists like himself who thought that direct action could readily realise the nation's potential, and realists who stressed the limitations of Australia's physical environment and of government action. The debates this generated on regionalism, new technology, new states, economic planning and Federalism stretched right through the inter-war years and beyond. Some of these became lost causes, but all were important currents in Australian history. And, of course, it's dangerous to write any cause off entirely!

There is a troublesome side issue here for a historian; that of how to deal with failure. Many of Page's most treasured ideas simply bombed. Yet he still had an influence on what was debated in our past. And even if an issue has so far led to very little practical outcome today, it can still be significant as a

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[7] S.J. Butlin 'The Role of Planning in Australian Economic Development', in *Economic Papers No 15–Planned and Unplanned Development*, The Economic Society of Australia and New Zealand, Sydney, 1962, p. 12.

[8] Donald Horne, *Money Made Us*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1976, pp. 133-4.

matter of history. Failure I think helps to delineate what was and wasn't possible in Australian political culture.

Talking of failure—I mentioned two particularly extraordinary initiatives by Page. As promised, I can't resist an extended digression into one of these; the national council saga of 1938–9.

The very first file in Page's voluminous personal papers that I popped open revealed a very strange tale of his effectively seizing control of the Commonwealth government in 1938–39 and attempting to persuade premiers to form a national planning body. I started to sense what a remarkable subject Page was could be.

We are not talking here about an attempted centrally planned command economy. Essentially, Page tried to radically re-cast economic policy-making by creating an influential central advisory body to lead a form of indicative planning. This would guide decentralisation of industry and population by encouraging new industries and infrastructure outside the big cities.

Page had developed a strong interest in planning back in the 1920s when he became a champion of the Development and Migration Commission. This quite remarkable Commonwealth body oversaw assisted migration from Britain, and also had a wide brief to investigate and recommend priorities for the Australian economy. Page adopted a model for planning that drew on the DMC—that of a wide-ranging advisory body comprising industrialists acting as disinterested counsels, with willing representatives from each of the states, all led by a strong chief executive. (The DMC had been headed by the Promethean industrialist Herbert Gepp).

During the late 1930s under a compliant Prime Minister Lyons, Page tried to re-create such a body—his national council. This initiative briefly held the attention of all Australian governments, yet is mentioned only in passing in most histories of the period, with even less appreciation of the significance of Page's role. It sits at the turning point of his long career.

Page stated in his memoirs that he returned from trade talks in Britain in 1938 convinced war was inevitable, and began looking for ways 'of co-ordinating Federal and state capital expenditure on defence and development and of allocating priorities to indispensable projects.'[9]

It is very evident from his private letters that his main motivation was to seize the best opportunity in years to implement his planning and decentralist agenda. Page said that as the international political environment darkened, 'now is the [guess what!] psychological moment for a definite call to national service, a national outlook, and a national programme'. The national council was to plan new industries and infrastructure so as to 'attack the cause of excessive population in the vulnerable centres' and lead to 'balanced development'.

Initially, he proposed re-casting the existing Loan Council of all governments as his planning body, but to be driven by expert advisers of officials and business leaders. Page's thinking on the exact policy tools it would employ was fuzzy. He didn't go much beyond proposing the targeted application of tariffs, freight subsidies on railways, tax privileges and a national electricity grid as triggers to start a 'reproductive' process of regional growth.

It speaks proverbial volumes for Page's dominance over the then mortally ill Joe Lyons that he was able to call a Premiers' Conference to consider this ill-defined, overstretched proposal, convened in Canberra in the old House of Representatives chamber on 21 October 1938. Prime Minister Lyons had to be flown in from his sick bed in Devonport and briefed by Page as they drove in from Canberra airport. Lyons's opening speech to the assembled premiers was still only half ready as he began his delivery, obliging him to speak slowly whilst it was typed up and handed to him leaf by leaf.

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[9] *Truant Surgeon*, p. 301.

The premiers were baffled by the cost implications and the proposed dilution of their control over public projects. Bertram Stevens of New South Wales was by far the least unfavourable. Interestingly, there was also mistrust of Page himself. Page reported in his memoirs that the states became openly suspicious once they 'recognised me as author'.[10]

So, the conference floundered its way to a non-committal resolution. The states agreed merely to 'examine the possibility of undertaking … new public works suggested by the Commonwealth.' The whole meeting had lasted two hours, despite allowance for two days. The *Argus* reported that one premier had been anxious to leave for Melbourne in time for a race meeting. (Albert Dunstan, no doubt).[11]

But Page was never one to give up easily. He kept pressing Lyons, who duly agreed to another Premiers' Conference, scheduled for 31 March 1939. To reassure the states, Page now proposed an even stronger national council made up entirely of State and Federal ministers, supported by a standing committee of experts.

The second conference with the premiers was hardly an advance on that of the previous October. The states did agree to a national council, but saddled it with magnificently meaningless responsibilities. This very public extended policy misfire, in full view of his political peers, also helps mark the start of Page's political decline, in addition to his Menzies speech.

Was the failure of the national council initiative a further factor in Page's hostility to Menzies? Page was conscious of a shortage of public support from his Federal colleagues, and in *Truant Surgeon* made particular mention of Menzies' unconcealed aloofness from proceedings with the premiers. Witnessing Page assume effective leadership of the government may well have been a last straw for Menzies' confidence in Lyons. His 1938 speech on leadership that was widely interpreted as a public attack on Lyons was delivered just three days after the first premiers' conference on Page's plan.

Conclusions—my last six!

How do I see him in history? In sum, Page became developmentalism's foremost standard bearer; he drew disparate ideas together into a unique vision and gave many of its elements more significance in Australian history than they would otherwise have had.

First, Page played a major role in firmly establishing some important concepts as lasting features of Australian political culture. He was, for example, the most prominent parliamentary advocate of the allied concepts of regionalism, new states and decentralisation. Page directly steered the agendas of governments he served in, lobbied governments when he was in opposition, appealed to the press and added ideas from outside formal politics into parliamentary debate, always inciting reactions to his incessant activity.

Second, Page's career is consistent with comments by the political scientist James Walter critiquing the longstanding assumption that Australia has a political history devoid of ideas.[12] No Mill, Hobbes or Jefferson. But Walter wrote of Australia's numerous practically-minded 'organic intellectuals', as they are sometimes called, who have been underrated as thinkers. We have an excellent crop of these, encompassing individual business leaders, academics, economists, trade unionists, theologians and others.

Third, on Federalism, Page was the leading proponent of the view that the constitution was, in its existing form, a barrier to national development. From the mid-1920s he became the foremost

[10] *Truant Surgeon*, p. 264.

[11] *Argus* 24 October 1938, p. 4.

[12] See James Walter with Tod Moore, *What Were They Thinking?: The Politics of Ideas in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2010.

advocate of reforming Federalism by co-operativism rather than blunt attempts to re-write the constitution. His greatest success here was in institutionalising co-operative Federalism, especially via the Australian Agricultural Council of 1935.

Fourth, on developmentalism, as I touched on earlier, it is often assumed that the Australian people and their governments once had a near unanimous and heroic commitment to nation building through great, visionary projects, and that this stalwart trait was somehow lost during the latter decades of the twentieth century. The Snowy Mountains scheme is routinely presented as Exhibit A.

But Page's career suggests a far more nuanced and complex narrative. The wider Australian body politic was not uncritically committed to avowed nation building. Consider the following:

- in the 1920s professional engineers poured scorn on the practicality of hydroelectricity in mainland Australia
- planning proposals attracted public accusations that Page was an impractical dreamer
- and, in the late 1950s, official committees of inquiry on constitutional review and the dairy industry listened to Page respectfully but declined to accept his prescription for national development.

And so on. Indeed, Page's career embodies an important ongoing tension in Australian history. This is between, on the one hand, ardent developmentalists and optimists who thought that direct action could readily realise the nation's potential; and, on the other, realists who stressed the limitations of the natural environment and of government action. Developmentalist proposals for big projects were often more strongly supported at the intellectual and popular levels than by policy-makers.

Fifth, additionally, the strength of Australian developmentalism shifted over time. It re-asserted itself in the early 1920s, but some scepticism concerning Page's developmentalist ambitions was discernible even then. His increasing isolation from his political peers suggests that this scepticism slowly strengthened and became dominant in the 1950s. Although his career confirms that Australia has long inspired visions of its being re-shaped to fulfil national potential, such dreams were increasingly challenged in twentieth century Australia.

Sixth, one last thought. There was, until about a generation ago, a tendency by biographers to conventionalise our main political figures generally—to overlook Deakin's spiritualism, or Curtin's depression and alcoholism, for example.

To this I add Page's unique dreaming of a very different Australia.

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