

Sir Earle Christmas Grafton PAGE, PC, CH, KCMG

Prime Minister 7 April to 26 April 1939



- Earle Page became the 11th prime minister following the death of Joseph Lyons. Page was deputy prime minister in the Lyons Government and Australia's first 'caretaker' prime minister.
- Member of the Farmers and Settlers Association and New State League 1915-25.
- Member of the Country Party of Australia 1920-61.
- Member of House of Representatives representing Cowper (NSW) 1920-61; Treasurer 1923-29; Minister for Commerce 1934-39, 1940-41; Health 1937-38, 1949-56.
- Page ceased to be prime minister when the new United Australia Party leader, Robert Menzies, was elected to replace him. The UAP was the majority party in the coalition.

Main achievements (1921-1956)

- Founder of the Country Party in 1920 and parliamentary leader of the party 1921-39.
- Entered agreement with ruling Nationalist Party to form Australia's first coalition government 1923-29, and served as deputy prime minister in that government 1923-29. As Treasurer, Page initiated subsidies for rural exports, abolished Federal land tax and set up a rural credits department within the Commonwealth Bank. With Bruce, he created the Loan Council in 1924, which became statutory in 1929.
- Also served as deputy prime minister in coalition government with United Australia Party headed by Joseph Lyons in 1934. He founded the Australian Agricultural Council and led two trade delegations to London, 1936 and 1938.
- Served on Australian War Cabinet 1941 and Advisory War Council 1942-43, 1944-45, and the Pacific War Council in London 1942.
- As Minister for Health 1949-56 in Menzies government, he legislated for the provision of free essential pharmaceuticals, free medical services for the poor, subsidised private health insurance contributions and increased Commonwealth funding for hospitals.

Personal life

- Born at Grafton, New South Wales, 8 August 1880. Died Sydney 20 December 1961.
- Educated Grafton Public School, Sydney High and University of Sydney 1895-1902. Graduated in Medicine. Worked at Sydney's Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and established practice at Grafton. Attended medical congress in New Zealand in 1908 and became interested in hydro-electric power. Invested in rural properties. Entered local politics as a South Grafton Alderman 1913-19
- Joined the Australian Imperial Force Army Medical Corps and served as a surgeon in Egypt and France 1916. Married Ethel Blunt, Sydney, 18 September 1906, and (after death of Ethel in 1958) Jean Thomas, London, 20 July 1959.

Life after politics

- He stood again for Cowper in December 1961 but died before the result; his loss of the seat after 42 years, was known.

Character

- *[After securing a coalition with Bruce 1923-29] In Bruce he found an ideal partner. Both were relatively young, successful businessmen and former soldiers who were keen to streamline government and promote economic development within an Imperial framework. Bruce would obtain the 'Men, Money and Markets' from Britain and Page as treasurer would concentrate on domestic arrangements... As Bruce was later to say, Page's mind teemed with ideas and Bruce, being more methodical and a more effective speaker, worked out how to present them. Page was garrulous and democratic, Bruce aloof and patrician... Page was 5 ft 8½ ins (174 cm) tall, blue-eyed, with a shock of wavy brown hair; robust, possessing the delicate hands of a surgeon and the brawny forearms of a blacksmith. He rode a horse and played a daily hard game of tennis until he was over 80, playing it, as he did politics, with scant regard for the rules. His impatience and quick mind led him to speak in a torrent of high-pitched words with ideas often outstripping expression. (Source: Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 11, MUP, 1988, pp 118-122)*

Did you know?

- Page was a member of every Parliament from the 8th to the 23rd.
- Nickname was 'the Doc'.
- In 1904, became one of the first Australians to own a car.
- In 1924, chaired the first Cabinet meeting held in Canberra.
- As prime minister for only 20 days, Page is beaten only by Frank Forde for the shortest reign. Forde was prime minister for only eight days in July 1945.
- He was the first Chancellor of the University of New England 1955.
- His memoirs, *Truant Surgeon*, were published two years after his death.

Sources

National Archives of Australia: <http://primeministers.naa.gov.au>

Bridge, C., 'Page, Sir Earle Christmas Grafton (1880 - 1961)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 11, MUP, 1988, pp 118-122. On-line: www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A110127b.htm

Further reading

Page, Earle, ed. by Ann Mozley, *Truant Surgeon: the Inside Story of Forty Years of Australian Political Life*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1963

