

Policy Launch Speech: Earle Page, Leader (CP)

Grafton Town Hall, 26 October 1922

“Australia has reached the period in her history where her greatest need is sound Government upon an organized plan, recognizing the stern necessity for economy without crippling the development of her primary and secondary industries. The country party claims that its mission is to lead the campaign with this objective. Some of our opponents maintain that in accepting this responsibility we are making the way easier for the return to power of the extremists in the community. With this we join issue and ask the people of Australia whether the 475,000 electors who have already seen fit to espouse our cause at the polls fail to recognize their duty.

Is it reasonable to suggest that these people whom the country party represents and who have a stake in Australia totaling in round figures over £300,000,000 and who bear by far the largest proportion of taxation, are likely to take any action which will bring into power a Government that would increase their burden? Such a suggestion can alone come from a warped mind which little understands the outlook of the men and women of Australia who to-day are bearing the heat and burden of the development of our vast primary industries. At this period Australia can look with confidence for vision and a constructive national policy from those who represent the producers.

The country political movement aims, not at the overthrow of the present cities, but at the creation of many new cities scattered throughout the whole continent. It aims to vitalize and “energise” the supporting districts, providing centers of education, refinement, recreation and employment.

In the Federal Parliaments, while too small yet to hold the balance of power, we have been able to act as the watchdog of the public interest, and a brake on waste and extravagance, while securing greater postal and telephone facilities and rectifying some of the anomalies in the incidence of taxation. It has been the only party which has honestly endeavoured to check extravagance and condemn waste. It has insisted that the Budget be brought down before the money has been spent, as had not been the custom for so many years under the cloak of war. It has fought for fair treatment in the tariff for implements, tools of trade, manures wire-netting, and other articles which are the essentials for the proper development of our primary industries. It has fought for our national production to be treated as an asset of the nation, and not as a political pawn. It has fought to restrict the functions of Government to governing and not trading. It has led the van in the fight for the re-establishment of constitutional Government and effective Parliamentary control of the public purse.

The party stands first and foremost for the integrity of the party. The British Commonwealth of Nations is held together by the silken bonds of sentiment, which should be strengthened by a fuller knowledge of each dominion’s conditions, aspirations, and problems. The recent Near Eastern imbroglio indicates the necessity of some better system of Imperial consultation between the component parts of the Empire.

We feel that the present system of representation in London by a High Commissioner has failed to reach a state of effectiveness. The time has arrived for its replacement by the constitution of a Committee of External Affairs, in which there shall be a Cabinet Minister from each of the Dominions, directly responsible to his own Parliament, and a direct representative of the people, changing with the Ministry and going back into active politics at the close of his term.

In this way we would be providing an open channel of communications oversea, and making it possible upon the return of these Ministers to establish a Council of External or Imperial Civil Service to attract capable officers, but it insists that the Government service should be limited by the abstention from trading activities of all sorts; that the public credit should be maintained by current expenditure being kept within the current income; by practical proof being given by the Government of an anxious and increasing desire to discharge the present indebtedness by provision of a constant redemption fund, that all new loans should be for productive works, and should contain as part of their contract adequate provision for their redemption, and that the duplication of services should immediately cease.

The Government should call to its aid a committee representative of the best financial brains in the Commonwealth, and then present to Parliament a scheme by which the public indebtedness can be funded and gradually amortised.

The most startling fact that we have to face is that while this huge increase in debt has been going on there has been a steady decline in the quantity of production which has been disguised by the increased prices we have been getting.

Recognizing the truth of the axiom that finance is Government and Government is finance, the Country party has insisted that the first essential in a policy for Australia is to lessen the cost of Government; to reduce her unproductive debts at the earliest possible moment. This would secure a permanent reduction in taxation, and the removal of the strangling effects on enterprise whose capital would otherwise be used in development, but is now being mopped up by the tax-gatherer. All other parts of the Empire have faced this position except Australia.

The Country party upon its entrance into Parliament secured a definite statement from the Prime Minister that in future a budget would be presented and discussed within three months of the beginning of the financial year. At the same time we were given a promise of economy in administration. This promise of economy, however, was not fulfilled, so our party fought last year for the principle that current expenditure should not exceed current income. Though we were unsuccessful in securing the recognition of this principle, we were able to force a reduction by Parliament of half a million pounds in the estimated expenditure. Some idea of the total disregard of the financial position of the country may be arrived at when it is known that despite this reduction by Parliament, the Government spent one million pounds more than voted upon the floor of the House.

In presenting this year's Estimates the Government has arranged to balance its accounts by use of half of the surplus, which has been accumulating for many years and by juggling with the loan estimates. The figures presented to Parliament show no actual reduction of expenditure below the previous year's Estimates in the ordinary Government Departments.

There is infinitely more reason for the reduction of the Federal Department expenditure in Australia, where the position has not been faced, other than in either

England or New Zealand which, as unitary Governments, have only one taxing machine.

The present position as regards the State and Federal collection of taxes is intolerable and reform would permit of immediate economies being effected. It is ludicrous that while the Commonwealth pays back on the one hand between £6,000,000 and £7,000,000 of indirect taxation it has collected, to the States, with the other hand it grasps between £18,000,000 and £19,000,000 of direct taxation in competition with them.

War obligations do not immediately permit of the Commonwealth evacuation of the field of direct taxation, but an earnest of its intention to ultimately do so could be the early handing over of the business of collection to the States, which are much nearer to their job, so affecting an immediate economy.

The Country party's policy of national economy aims at something more than a squaring of the ledger or reduction of debt, though this is sufficiently urgent. It desires to organize the nation's credit, especially rural, which is at present largely unmobilized; to provide a reservoir of the surplus wealth of our bounteous seasons which will keep the flow of prosperity at an even pressure through all the channels of our national system during all seasons and thus prevent loss.

It is the most important, and should be the first policy of Australia to guard against these fluctuations, due to periodical dry seasons. We must provide a national reservoir that will secure the rapid and continuous exchange of wealth, keeping it flowing simultaneously in all directions so that all branches of industry may be able to secure the necessary working capital to keep them in a state of prosperity. To effect this we need a new outlook, in regard to our national finance – the provision of some means so that the nation's savings will not be diverted as they are at the present time to Government uses or even to investments abroad, but will be available for the development and production of that surplus of wealth without which there can be no improvement in the standard of living.

Any attempt to remodel and organize our national credit brings into review the present condition of the Commonwealth Bank. Established as was the general belief, to assist in the development of primary and secondary industry, we find that this institution has rapidly developed into a competitor upon ordinary banking lines with the existing privately-owned institutions. Without in any way reflecting upon the present management, we feel that this institution should now be placed under a board of directors upon lines similar to the Bank of England.

These directors should be men of the broadest outlook and representative of our industries. Free from all political control, they should be placed in a position to make available the vast resources of this institution for development of the primary and secondary industries in Australia. A survey of the figures of the Commonwealth Bank in comparison with those of the private banking institutions show that in proportion to the holdings of the two, the latter are making far more effective use of the people's funds in the way of advanced for the assistance of industry to-day. The assurance of stability of employment in the cities and towns is dependent upon purchasing power can best be secured by making primary production profitable by the reorganization of the Commonwealth Bank with the establishment of a system of cooperative and rural credits, and with a Land Bank as an integral part of its savings bank department. The work of this institution should then be:

- (a) To arrange advances upon broad acres.
- (b) To assist co-operative finance in primary and secondary production.
- (c) To assist in land settlement and development.
- (d) To assist in financing a grain and fodder reserve against periods of drought.
- (e) To assist in financing a national scheme for the conservation of water and the establishment of a comprehensive scheme for cheap power from water and coal.

To secure the full benefits accruing from the added purchasing power created in the country by such national undertakings, to the employees in primary and secondary industries, there should also be established:

- (a) A system of national insurance against unemployment and sickness to be administered in co-operation with the existing registered friendly societies.
- (b) National insurance against poverty in old age.

The Country party stands for the establishment of conciliation committees and wages boards in every industry, without compulsory powers, for the settlement of industrial disputes, to take the place of the present system of arbitration. These conciliatory committees, in the nature of a round-table conference, should consist of an equal number of representatives of employer and employee, with an independent chairman. Sitting right on the spot of the dispute, actually identified with the industry, and appointed specifically to deal with the dispute that has arisen, we feel it is more likely to produce a quick and satisfactory decision as a result of conciliation than is an arbitration court with all its legal surroundings, and where every possible difficulty is placed in the way of either side. Inter-lapping, we should at once aim at securing a precise definition of the powers and duties of the Federal and State authorities.

Our party stands for the encouragement of a national spirit among the Australian people for the ideal of a White Australia and the integrity of the British empire. To this end it is prepared to carry on a vigorous immigration policy, care being taken in the selection of immigrants, preference being given to agriculturalists and domestic servants of British origin. We shall set our face against any indiscriminate flooding of Australia with immigrants who cannot be absorbed, and feel that immigration should be carried out on an ordered plan.

We believe that the conserving of water and establishing of power schemes throughout Australia would be work in which we could absorb large numbers of new arrivals, and the subsequent development of industries as the result of low power cost would bring in its train a steady stream of skilled labour. The Federal and State Governments should co-operate in the liberalizing of Crown lands conditions and preparation of definite schemes, in which group settlement areas, with all facilities for the proper tuition and supervision of immigrants, shall be provided.

We stand for the fixing of Parliamentary salaries at a flat rate under the Constitution, with a special living allowance based upon the geographical situation of the electorate in relation to the seat of government.

The Country party stands for the granting of preference wherever possible to ex-service men. It has already very definitely criticized the colossal bungle made throughout Australia in regard to the war service homes, and will press for a thorough investigation and re-appraisal of these homes, thereby fixing immediately a

capital value upon which the soldier shall have a reasonable chance of making his repayments. The party also considers the time has arrived for a thorough investigation of war pensions as at present applied, on account of the many apparent cases of hardship.

The Country party believes that with the adoption of the economies that it suggests in the earlier part of its policy it will be possible to reduce considerably general taxation. It stands for the adoption of a system of taxation based upon the averaging principle, whereby the taxable income derived from production shall be calculated on the average income over a period of five years.

In regard to the tariff, the party is prepared to grant reasonable protection to Australian production, but where it is necessary for any industry to receive further assistance it should be in the form of a bounty. It will fight for a reduction of duties on the staple necessities of the producer, and for the admission of implements and tools of trade free of duty when made within the British Empire.

The party stands for the full encouragement of private enterprise, initiative and cooperative effort in production and manufacture, with the strictest limitation of Government enterprise to developmental works and public utilities.

It, therefore, desires an immediate and thorough investigation of the Commonwealth shipping undertakings, the Persian oil agreement, the wireless agreement, and other doubtful transactions by independent tribunals. In the light of these inquires the party will shape its course.

The party will give every assistance to the establishment of co-operative control of the meat, wheat, wool, sugar, dairying, fruit, and other primary industries, by placing each in the hands of representative tribunals in order to regulate matters fairly to all concerned. The sugar industry, it feels, should be safeguarded by legislation ensuring it is against unfair competition, detrimental to the White Australia policy. It believes that where boards and commissions dealing with the special interests of producers are set up, the representation of producers should constitute a majority, and should be nominated and elected by the organizations of the producers.

The party will continue to stand for the creating of voluntary cooperative pools without any Government interference, and advocate that these be financed not through the Government, but on business lines through financial institutions under proper organization of combined rural credit.

In regard to oversea marketing, the party will assist pioneering work by the subsidizing of organized private enterprise or cooperative effort as against the appointment of Government trade commissioners attached to the Civil Service. It believes that in this way far better results can be secured by the responsibility being placed upon the various industries to make their representation oversea successful in developing trade.

We advocate the handing over to the Federal authorities of the complete control of quarantine, and to local governing bodies the administration connected with local hospitals and sanitation. The co-ordination of Federal and State activities for the prevention of epidemic and endemic diseases will receive our warmest support.

An effort will be made in the next Parliament to amend the Parliamentary Representation act so as to ensure that when the next redistribution takes place each State (except those entitled to the minimum representation of five) will be entitled to

representation in the House of Representatives in true proportion of their population. Further effort will be made to place proportional representation for the Senate on the Statute Book.

Much has been said by the Government of its much-belated proposal for carrying out the overdue postal works. An effort was made by the Country party during the last Parliament to have the profits of the Postal Department retained and spent upon increasing facilities of that department, instead of giving it into the general revenue. The Nationalist party defeated the proposal, but at the earliest opportunity the Country party will endeavour to have effect given to it.

The question has been raised as to how far the Country party is prepared to work in harmony with other parties in Parliament. In this regard we can only say that while we are not prepared to enter in any entangling alliance which would in any way destroy the entity of the Country party, to cooperate with any other representatives of the people upon the floor of the House or in the conduct of the Government of the country who hold the same ideals and principles which we advocate.”

Source: Compiled from The Sydney Morning Herald 27 October 1922, Page 9-10 and original documents.