

Argyle, Sir Stanley Seymour (1867-1940)

Sir Stanley Seymour Argyle (1867-1940), premier and medical practitioner, was born on 4 December 1867 at Kyneton, Victoria, son of Edward Argyle and his wife Mary, née Clark. His mother was born in Sydney; his father had migrated from Derbyshire thirty years before and, following (Sir) Thomas Mitchell's explorations, had been a successful pioneer squatter in north-eastern Victoria before moving first to Sandhurst (Bendigo), and then to Kyneton.

Educated at Hawthorn Grammar School and under Dr G. H. Crowther at Brighton Grammar School, Argyle entered the University of Melbourne in 1886 to study medicine. In his last year, 1890, as a senior student at Trinity College, he was involved in the famous protest against the alleged maladministration of the warden Dr Alexander Leeper. He was expelled for 'contumacy' after chairing a student meeting and, with two others who were expelled and thirty-four who left in sympathy, quitted the college in a long procession of hansom cabs. It may be doubted if the *Age* was justified in claiming that the affair was a manifestation of 'the spirit of insubordination' then being exhibited in the great maritime and shearers' strikes; Argyle did not remain a rebel and showed little sympathy with police protesters against alleged injustice thirty years later.

After graduating (M.B., 1890; Ch.B., 1891), Argyle went to England, and in 1892 obtained the conjoint M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P. diploma before studying bacteriology at King's College, London, but financial difficulties arising from the bank smash compelled him to return home after two years, when he set up as a general practitioner in Kew. There he soon showed his interest in the supply of pure milk, and in 1898 founded the Willsmere Certificated Milk Co., of which he was a director until 1920. On 24 January 1895 at Holy Trinity Church, Kew, he had married Violet Ellen Jessie Lewis. Three years later he was elected to the local council, and served as mayor for two terms in 1903-05; in that office he began the agitation for the removal of the Kew Lunatic Asylum. In 1908, soon after he had begun to specialize in X-ray work, he was appointed 'medical electrician and skiagraphist' (called 'radiologist' in 1920) at the Alfred Hospital; in the next six years he succeeded in obtaining assistance from the government in buying radium, and from the Walter and Eliza Hall Trust for building an electrical pavilion; in 1924 he obtained funds for additions to it when he became director of radiology.

During World War I Argyle served as skiagraphist in the 1st Australian General Hospital in Cairo, where, like many others, he fell foul of (Sir) James Barrett; he took a radiology unit to Lemnos in 1915 and later, as consultant radiologist to the Australian Imperial Force, served in France and England before returning home in April 1917 with the rank of lieutenant-colonel. A Collins Street specialist of some standing, he was elected to the council of the Victorian Branch of the British Medical Association in 1918, and was its vice-president in 1923 and 1924 and president in 1925. By then he had entered the Legislative Assembly, winning Toorak in 1920 as an independent Nationalist against Barrett, the endorsed party candidate. He criticized secretive party selections and, while opposing government interference with private enterprise, strongly supported policies of development, irrigation, assistance to primary producers, a good milk-supply, voluntary charitable support for hospitals, compulsory health insurance, and scripture-reading in state schools. As a back-bencher and busy doctor he was not an unduly active member, but he urged greater expenditure on the

university and on public health, and strongly supported both the government's hospital and charities bill, reiterating his objections to its interference in the internal management of hospitals, and the metropolitan milk bill, which was intended to improve the quality of Melbourne's milk. After the latter was held up in the Legislative Council in 1921, he was nominated to a committee to consider amendments, and visited New Zealand to report on milk-supply there; an amended measure was enacted in 1922.

Like other 'metropolitan liberals', of whom he was the most important, Argyle was not entirely happy with the existing Lawson ministry. His group contributed to the pressure which compelled its reconstruction on 7 September 1923 (and soon afterwards the resignation of the economically minded treasurer Sir William McPherson); he then took office as chief secretary and minister of health, posts which he held under Lawson and his successor, Sir Alexander Peacock, until 18 July 1924.

Faced almost at once with a police strike in November 1923, Argyle was adamant in refusing to re-employ those whom he described as 'mutineers' who, he insisted, had broken their oath. Although he immediately carried the Police Pensions Act, which met one of the most important grievances of the strikers, he refused to order a full inquiry into the condition of the force; however, the short-lived Prendergast government did so, and after Argyle had returned to office he hoped that his selection of Brigadier General Blamey as chief commissioner in 1925 would lead to reforms.

Argyle was chief secretary and minister of health again under John Allan from 18 November 1924 to 20 May 1927, and under McPherson from 22 November 1928 to 12 December 1929, a year when he felt compelled to give up his Alfred Hospital appointment, though he continued as consulting radiologist there. He introduced a mental deficiency bill in 1926, but it failed to pass owing to lack of time, and he never brought it up again (though he was to welcome its reappearance in 1939). He was more successful in carrying a redistribution of seats bill (which had failed in 1924) that, while correcting many anomalies, set the 'normal' number of voters in country electorates at about one half that of city ones; as minister, he accepted compulsory voting and the abolition of plural enrolments which he had previously opposed. Argyle supported borrowing for development and for creating 'outer ports' away from Melbourne. In the public health field, he did not move the Kew Asylum, but he invited Dr M. McEachern from the United States of America to report on hospital problems generally, and warmly supported his advocacy of establishing paying wards in public hospitals. In 1927, with Professor Berry, he visited the United States to investigate medical training establishments there, and to enlist the aid of the Rockefeller Foundation for financing medical research. He strongly recommended establishing a teaching hospital adjacent to and allied with the university.

In opposition in 1927-28, Argyle opposed the financial agreement as giving too much power to the Commonwealth, and an unemployment insurance scheme as likely to lead to socialism; when back in office next year under McPherson, he was able to reserve the site near the university for the Melbourne Hospital. The government was defeated at the election at the end of 1929. Argyle was knighted on 1 January 1930, and later that year he was chosen to lead his party and the Opposition. He steadily refused to criticize the Labor government for past extravagance, for which he argued all sections of the community were 'equally blameworthy', living 'in a fool's paradise', but he strongly and consistently urged it to economize in expenditure, to reduce wages and rates of taxation while

widening the field of taxpayers, and to insist that the unemployed should work in return for their sustenance payments. This policy he implemented immediately he returned to office in May 1932, after the disintegration and electoral defeat of the Hogan government.

Now premier, treasurer, and minister for health, Argyle appointed a non-political committee to approve relief works, and by paying rates which were 'under award' though higher than those for sustenance without work, he was able, without increasing total expenditure, to raise the number employed on them. Other emergency measures he adopted were to charge fees at the State high schools, and to adjust the payments due to the State from those who had borrowed money under the various closer settlement schemes; to assist private enterprise, his government forbade the 'socialist' practice of the State Electricity Commission selling electrical appliances. At the election in 1935, Argyle's United Australia Party lost several seats to the Country Party and, although the two parties had faced the electorate as allies, the latter decided to leave his ministry when he refused to give them more portfolios; faced with combined Labor-Country Party opposition, the government was defeated in the Legislative Assembly, and on 2 April he became leader of the Opposition again. Powerless in the assembly, his effective work was over, though he remained leader of his party.

Argyle suffered in later years from chronic bronchitis and emphysema of which he died at Toorak on 23 November 1940. Cremated after a state funeral, he was survived by his wife, two sons and two daughters. His estate, valued for probate at £9090, included a citrus orchard at Lake Kangaroo near Bael Bael. A bust by Paul Montford is in Parliament House, Melbourne.

A competent administrator and a man of the utmost integrity, Argyle had given unstinting service to the State and to his profession, but his contributions were perhaps limited by a lack of imagination and by the outlook possessed by most men of his position in the first half of the century, despite his anxiety to improve particular aspects of the community's life that came specifically under his notice.

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A G L Shaw, Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol.7, 1979.



