

Alfred Deakin

A centenary tribute*

Stuart Macintyre

One hundred years ago, in the seat of national government in Melbourne, two men were wrestling with difficult choices. Edmund Barton, the Prime Minister, was seeking reassurance that his decision to resign and take up a post on the High Court was justified. It would give him greater financial security, respite from onerous responsibilities and more time with his family in Sydney. But he had held the national leadership for fewer than three years. ‘Can I persuade myself to leave politics and take the second place?’ he asked the Governor-General.

His colleague Alfred Deakin faced a choice of similar difficulty. He and Barton had worked closely to bring the new Commonwealth into existence. When the first federal government was formed it was clear that the leadership would go to a representative of the leading state. The contenders were the truculent premier of New South Wales, William Lyne, and Barton, who was the head of the federal movement in that state. Deakin was instrumental in ensuring that Barton was commissioned the first prime minister and Deakin served as his deputy.

Now, with Barton’s departure, he thought that Lyne should have his turn and offered to stand aside and support him if the members of the Liberal Protectionist Party wanted Lyne. Lyne tested his party support and found it wanting. Deakin, meanwhile,

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went to see his friend and mentor, David Syme, the owner of the *Age* newspaper. 'D.S. says take P.M.', Deakin noted in his diary on 21 September 1903, and that is what he did. Three days later he was sworn in as the country's second prime minister.

He would serve just six months in his first term, then three and a half years more from 1905 to 1908, and finally for a further ten months in 1909 and 1910. For all but the final ten months he governed without a parliamentary majority and relied on the support of the Labor Party; to achieve the last term he merged his own Liberal Protectionist Party with the rival Free Traders and was hardly less constrained in his actions.

Yet Deakin, more than any other statesman, turned federal government from a constitutional framework into a living reality. He fashioned its distinctive institutions: the High Court that was the keystone in the federal arch; the Immigration Restriction Act that determined the nation's ethnic character; the Court of Conciliation and Arbitration that kept industrial peace; the federal tariff that protected local industry and the New Protection that linked the development of the economy with the maintenance of living standards; the imperial preference that affirmed trade links with United Kingdom, and the armed forces that safeguarded the country within the imperial defence umbrella.

Together these arrangements constituted a coherent policy that was designed to provide security, growth, harmony and purpose. Deakin laid the foundations of a national policy that persisted, with various modifications, for much of the twentieth century—so much so that when Paul Kelly wrote the story of the 1980s as a watershed marking *The End of Certainty*, he traced the old order back to Deakin's original design and described it as the Australian Settlement.

Deakin was self-effacing. He refused any official honours for his public service. As prime minister he either cycled or caught a tram from his private home in South Yarra to the Commonwealth offices in the city. Barton had lived in an apartment within the Parliament House and it was Deakin's successor, a Labor man, who arranged for an official car.

Following Deakin's death in 1919 the family commissioned Walter Murdoch to write what he called a biographical sketch. Murdoch, who had been part of Deakin's circle of younger admirers and had free access to his voluminous papers, produced an affectionate and perceptive portrait. Next, the family persuaded John La Nauze to work on Deakin. La Nauze published two of Deakin's own accounts of episodes in his career, and also wrote a superb biography. Since then there have been illuminating studies of Deakin's inner and family life. His name has been attached to a university in Victoria as well as a suburb in Canberra, and Deakin University has been pursuing a digital archive in conjunction with the National Library, which holds his papers.

Deakin's political legacy is more ambiguous. The present-day Liberal Party, which bears the same name as the party he led, claimed him in various statements and an annual lecture; but since the 1980s it has distanced itself from his form of communitarian liberalism and state activity. He occupies a lesser place in the Liberal pantheon, which is dominated by Robert Menzies. From a different perspective, Deakin is an unsympathetic figure in Manning Clark's *History of Australia*. He

appears in the fifth volume where the millennial hopes are dashed and radical nationalist fervour is lost as 'The People Make Laws'. He is presented as Mr Deakin, a figure of bourgeois rectitude, and is the foil for Henry Lawson, in whom the gale of life blows strongly. Other scholars have identified Deakinite liberalism as a distinctive strand of Australian political philosophy, sometimes approvingly and sometimes regretting its influence.

But these exercises have little impact on public awareness. The moral purpose that animated him and which he sought to realise in national life is so far removed from our own values as to be unintelligible. From time to time a newspaper hits on the idea of ranking the country's political leaders, and Deakin's name usually appears on the lists suggested by the experts, though usually below those of Curtin, Chifley and Menzies.

Deakin himself, the most striking and enigmatic of our public figures, has largely faded from public awareness. This was a man who did not want to be a politician and set little store by his political achievements. 'Last Day, thank God', he recorded in his journal upon leaving office for the last time. 'Thoroughly exhausted, but oh such an immense release and relief.' He possessed a warmth and vivacity of manner, a courtesy and sympathy that earned him the nickname of 'Affable Alfred', and yet there was an inner reserve that few penetrated. 'What truth can there be in history when a leader is a puzzle to his contemporaries?' asked one who served under him.

The anonymous reports on Commonwealth politics he wrote for an English newspaper throughout his premiership kept up this mask. Small wonder that he confessed to himself, 'I act alone, live alone, and think alone.' He maintained the highest standards of probity and enraged others with his expediency. 'Judas, Judas, Judas!' shouted William Lyne when Deakin joined with the Free Traders in 1909.

I cannot claim to solve the mystery of Alfred Deakin, but this occasion marking the anniversary of his elevation to the highest office provides a good opportunity to reflect on a man of remarkable distinction. I shall concentrate on particular episodes in his life that reveal aspects of his values and impulses.

The first of them comes in the late 1870s when he entered politics. He was then just 22, a restless young man with little idea of his future. He had been born in 1856 in Melbourne, the second child and only son of improving English immigrants. The family moved while Alfred was young from Fitzroy to the more salubrious South Yarra, so that from the age of eight he attended the nearby Melbourne Grammar School, where he was a gifted, dreamy pupil. At the University of Melbourne he studied law, but his principal interests were literature and spiritualism. He was admitted to the Melbourne bar in 1877, and took chambers, but secured few briefs and spent much of his time writing poetry, essays and literary criticism, while continuing his spiritual experiments and conducting Melbourne's spiritual Sunday school.

At this time he met David Syme. Syme was 50, and had just acquired a majority ownership of the *Age*, the Melbourne daily newspaper he had been directing for nearly twenty years and which he built up to the largest circulation in the country. He used it to impose his brand of advanced liberalism on Victorian politics, one that espoused a strong democracy and extensive government action to maximise the

benefits of progress. Syme was a dour Scot and a notoriously shy, suspicious, misanthropic and grim tyrant, yet after he took Deakin on as a contributor to his paper, the young man became his houseguest and constant companion.

Deakin's vivacious intensity evidently filled some inner need for intellectual and emotional companionship that the older man usually concealed behind a taciturn unapproachability. It was their habit to take long walks together during which Syme encouraged Deakin to indulge his enthusiasm for literature and religious speculation so that he could play the tough-minded sceptic.

When the Victorian liberal organisation consulted Syme to find a candidate for a parliamentary by-election (as it habitually consulted him on any matter of consequence) he nominated his 22-year-old protégée and threw all of the resources of the *Age* into securing his election. There was a price. Deakin had to surrender his attachment to free trade (free trade, was after all, the basis of nineteenth-century liberalism) in favour of Syme's hobbyhorse, government protection of local industry.

As the younger man recalled, they were walking over Princes Bridge and back to the *Age* office when Syme convinced him he had 'crossed the fiscal Rubicon'. The classical conceit could hardly disguise the nature of the submission. By his own acknowledgement, Deakin had become 'the pet of the proprietor'. As he established his career he was often taunted with being Syme's lapdog, and eventually felt the need to establish his independence. But he was and remained a protectionist, and a state interventionist, and this was the mould that formed the Commonwealth.

On his entry to politics there was a further telling incident. Deakin narrowly won the by-election but it was disputed because the supply of ballot papers had run out at one of the polling stations. In his maiden speech he startled the members by resigning to allow another by-election. This time he was defeated by fifteen votes, and he lost again in the general election of 1880 before the house was dissolved and yet another general election was held. He embarked on a parliamentary career that would last 30 years with a reputation for quixotic gallantry.

Deakin had not wanted to be a politician; writing in 1900 about these events, he said he became one by 'sheer force of circumstance' and the occupation became congenial to him only by degrees. He would have preferred a literary career. His entry into politics coincided also with marriage to Pattie Browne, whom he met through spiritualism. The marriage was a cornerstone of Deakin's domestic life, and he would describe it as a 'sacred circle' within which he 'rested and recuperated' was 'reinforced, encouraged, solaced and soothed to sweet content'. The separation of the public and the private, the impersonal world of affairs and the domestic circle of purity, is a commonplace of the nineteenth-century masculine sensibility. It is fundamental to Deakin's.

Once launched on his career, Deakin advanced rapidly. He was a commanding orator, an energetic administrator, and an innovator in public policy. By 1886 he had become leader of the Victorian Liberals, and joint leader of a coalition government until 1890. As Chief Secretary he represented his colony at the 1887 Imperial Conference in London, where he affronted the British representatives by pressing local interests in the Pacific region. It was at this conference that he was offered and refused a

knighthood. Aged just 30, he was the most assertive of the delegates, a native-born colonial nationalist and an independent Australian Briton.

My second episode comes with the breaking of the long boom and the severe Depression that brought Marvellous Melbourne undone. Deakin left office late in 1890 when growing concern for the state of Victorian finances resulted in the passage of a no confidence motion. The ensuing crash cost him his own and his father's savings. It also revealed a pattern of collusion between politicians, company promoters and bankers in extremely dubious practices.

Deakin's hands were not clean. He was chairman of several land companies. He was complicit in the special bankruptcy laws passed by the members of the Victorian legislature to allow debtors to make secret compositions with their creditors and protect themselves from ruin and disgrace. He did not use the special laws himself, but made good his fortune at the bar, appearing on behalf of the chief villains. And he also filled his pockets by appearing for his former patron, David Syme, in the great libel case brought by the dodgy Commissioner of Railways against whom the *Age* conducted a long vendetta. The Sydney *Bulletin* delighted in the spectacle of Alfred Deakin, lawyer, assailing Richard Speight, Commissioner, of being importuned by various politicians, including the Hon. Alfred Deakin MLA!

This second episode, then, sees the first great setback to his career (he remained out of office for a decade) and his repute.

There was another moment in the crash when Chief Secretary Deakin was not at his best—the Maritime Strike of 1890. This was the great confrontation between the employers and the newly formed union movement, triggered by the shipowners' dismissal of the maritime officers for affiliating to the Trades Hall Council, and it brought the ports and the economy to a standstill. Deakin proclaimed his sympathies with the workers, for if a choice had to be made between 'a little flesh and blood with much capital' and 'a great deal of flesh and blood with little capital', then surely 'the living and thinking weight must carry our sympathies.'

But once the strikers picketed the landing of supplies and especially when they stopped the gas supply on which public lighting depended, his sympathy gave out. A city without light! What opportunities would that give 'the worthless and ill-disposed persons in any city' to pillage innocent citizens? Hence he called out troops to break the strike. 'The question', as he saw it, 'was whether the city was to be handed over to mob law and the tender mercy of roughs and rascals, or whether it was to be governed, as it had always been governed, under law in peace and order.'

Deakin was a friend of labour and a champion of social justice, but he was fearful of combinations and the use of force. Reason had to control the passions. He could not comprehend the tribal loyalty mobilised by the labour movement or the class divisions that hardened as a colonial society turned into a modern industrial one. His career spanned the rise of the Labor Party, which would eat away at his own base of support and eventually force him into an alliance with the conservatives.

For the next decade Deakin was a backbencher and preoccupied with the federal movement. We might regard this as an act of penance for his earlier profligacy. He

saw it as an act of service and duty, as nothing less than a sacred mission. From the very beginning he was the champion of the federal cause in his own colony of Victoria, which in turn was its principal stronghold. He did not seek national leadership of the movement, for he appreciated that this role had to be performed by a statesman from New South Wales, which passed Victoria in population during the early 1890s and was far more divided over the merits of the federal scheme. So his life of devotion to federation required what he described as ‘self-suppression in public coupled with continuous activity in private.’

Deakin’s liberalism channelled his aspiration for a democratic Commonwealth that would unite the Australian people in a fully representative national government. At the same time he was conscious that the less populous colonies required safeguards, and behind the scenes he facilitated the necessary compromise between the majoritarian principle embodied in the House of Representatives with the claims for equal representation of states in the Senate. As a federalist he accepted there must be a division of powers between the Commonwealth and the States, but sought to ensure that the national government had adequate powers.

Once these arrangements were hammered out by the second Convention in a draft Constitution, Deakin defended it with all of his power. He personally persuaded David Syme to accept the accommodation and end the criticism of the *Age* newspaper, which imperilled its acceptance. His passionate speech at a dinner of the Australian Natives Association in Bendigo in 1898 rallied support against those more advanced democrats who thought it gave too much away to the conservative localists. This was the speech in which he quoted the words of a local poet, William Gay:

Our country’s garment
With petty hands unfilial we have basely rent,
With petty variance our souls are spent,
And ancient kinship under foot is trod:
O let us rise,—united,—penitent, —
And be one people,—mighty, serving God!

My third moment comes, then, in January 1901 when the Commonwealth was proclaimed and Deakin rejoiced that his sacred duty was fulfilled.

Or was it? It was clear from the outset that Deakin would transfer from state to federal politics, that he would lead the Liberal Protectionists in their Victorian stronghold, serve under Barton and try to give a more progressive cast to the ministry. Barton’s retirement in 1903 therefore gave him the opportunity to direct national policy. It was not an opportunity he welcomed—hence his equivocation over the succession—but one he saw as a continuation of duty.

By this time he was beginning to feel the strain of long parliamentary sittings, onerous administrative duties and frequent travel. He slept poorly, suffered gastric disturbance and was susceptible to colds. Still, at the end of the year, he went down to the family holiday house at Point Lonsdale and turned once more to his notebooks. On Christmas Eve he prayed:

Let me march straight to the goal whatever it may be in the superficial sphere in which I live and upon which I seek to work. As my opportunities are great, grant me strength, guidance, consistency, confidence, sincerity, patience and absolute personal abnegation.

The episode from this first Commonwealth Parliament that challenges us most is probably the passage of Immigration Restriction Act. The new nation institutionalised racial discrimination through the adoption of the dictation test to keep out all non-Caucasians. The measure attracted the crudest and ugliest expressions of race prejudice, though that was not the basis of Deakin's support of the White Australia policy. He was rather what we would now call a cultural relativist, who appreciated the achievements of other civilizations.

He was also a social Darwinist who believed that these civilizations were competing for supremacy. During the debate on the Immigration Restriction Act he argued that the Japanese had to be excluded from settlement in Australia precisely because of their high abilities: he said 'the Japanese most nearly approach us, and would therefore be our most formidable competitors.' This fear in turn rested on a belief in racial purity, a conviction that a mingling of races would result in conflict (as in the United States) and miscegenation. He did not apologise for the White Australia, he proclaimed it: 'The unity of Australia', he insisted, 'means not only that its members can intermix, intermarry and associate without degradation on either side, but implies one inspired by ideas, and an aspiration towards the same ideals.'

And what of those Australians who were not white? As Colonial Secretary in 1886 Deakin had introduced legislation that tightened the administration of the Victorian Aboriginal reserves. These small vestiges of land had been set aside for the protection of the Indigenous people on the assumption that they were incapable of surviving outside them; but the signs of successful adaptation confounded those expectations of imminent demise. The new law provided for the removal of those of mixed descent, who were to be absorbed into white society and expunged of their Aboriginality.

The passage of the Immigration Restriction Act in 1901 thus marks a fourth moment in the lifework of Alfred Deakin, and an aspect that runs through his life project. White Australia, he stated in 1903, 'is not a surface, but it is a reasoned policy which goes to the roots of national life, by which the whole of our social, industrial and political organisation is governed.'

Central to that national organisation was his doctrine of the New Protection, which linked tariff protection for local industry to the maintenance of Australian living standards. Deakinite liberalism set limits on the operation of the market to nurture a particular kind of nation-building social solidarity that would promote both equity and efficiency in a prosperous and true commonwealth.

The first tariff duties were principally designed to raise revenue but during Deakin's second ministry the government extended the protection of local industry with an additional twist: henceforth it was available only to employers who provided 'fair and reasonable' wages. The determination of a fair and reasonable wage was the task of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court, which had been established in the previous year.

Thus in 1907 it fell to Deakin's old friend Henry Bournes Higgins, whom he appointed to the presidency of the Arbitration Court, to ascertain the meaning of a fair and reasonable wage in a case concerning a large manufacturer of agricultural machinery. Higgins determined that such a wage should be sufficient to maintain a man as a 'human being in a civilised community'; furthermore, since 'marriage is the usual fate of adults', it must provide for the needs of a family. There was a successful High Court challenge to the decision and it took some years to extend the standard it set (which became known as the basic wage and was regularly adjusted for changes in the cost of living) across the Australian workforce, but the principles of Higgins' Harvester judgement became a fundamental feature of national life and one in which Deakin took pride. The Harvester judgement provides a fifth episode in the public career of Alfred Deakin.

The sixth episode came in the following year. The formation of the Commonwealth had coincided with (and was partly stimulated by) increased competition among the major European powers as they scrambled for overseas territories, and as Britain's naval supremacy came under threat. Hence the Australian alarm at the presence of France and Germany in the south-west Pacific. Deakin took a keen interest in the administration of Papua, which the Commonwealth had assumed from Britain. He pressed the British to annex the New Hebrides and was angered by its inept and secretive agreement with France for joint control.

Meanwhile, the Japanese destruction of a Russian fleet signalled a new danger to Australia's north. Deakin went to the 1907 Imperial Conference in London with a proposal for an imperial secretariat that would give self-governing dominions such as Australia a voice in foreign policy, and was rebuffed. He wanted to renegotiate the agreement whereby Australia contributed to the cost of the Royal Navy yet was denied consultation in its disposition, and was again rebuffed. He responded by inviting the American 'Great White Fleet' to visit Australian ports in 1908, and began preparations for the creation of an Australian navy. He also introduced legislation for compulsory military training.

We see here themes that have persisted ever since: the anxiety about regional security, the reliance on great and powerful friends, the attachment to empire and the insistence on an independent capacity.

These final measures coincided with a marked deterioration of Deakin's physical and mental powers. His loss of memory was a particular torment. He stayed on as party leader for three years after the electoral defeat but was a mere shadow of his former self. As he prepared for the general election of 1910 that would result in his final loss of office, he set down a reckoning of what he had achieved:

I am saddened not with these prospects but with the sense of opportunities missed or ignored ... saddened because I can achieve so little more and have accomplished so little in the past—also because everything in Australia (and in the world) is so obviously imperfect, inchoate, confused, stained and wickedly filled with false antagonisms, coarseness and incapacity, that the promised land of humanity still lies far out of sight ... Such is the public end of A.D.

He retired from public life in 1913. The final years were a torment of sleeplessness, declining health, and severe, incurable aphasia. His last public meeting was a conscription rally at the Melbourne Cricket Ground in 1917, an inauspicious place for one who had recoiled from crowds at sporting events with their base passions. Those passions found violent expression on this occasion as anti-conscriptionists hurled stones and bottles at the bellicose little prime minister, Billy Hughes, on the platform. Deakin wanted to speak but was unable to do so, and his message was published:

Fellow Countrymen—I have lived and worked to help you keep Australia white and free. The supreme Choice is given to you on December 20th. On that day you can say the word that shall keep her name white and for ever free.

God in his wisdom has decreed that at this great crisis in our history my tongue must be silent owing to my failing powers. He alone knows how I yearn, my fellow Australians, to help you say that magic word ...

They did not. Instead of voting Yes, they voted No. He lived in a twilight until death provided merciful release in 1919.

His achievements remain, and they deserve to be appreciated more widely. On the eve of the anniversary of his accession to national leadership I am delighted that the Senate lecture series provides an occasion to remember him and I hope that there will be further recognition. He was man of his time in his prejudices, but he was a man who transcended his times in his breadth, his gravity, his sense of duty and nobility of purpose. In his vices as well as his virtues he was touched with greatness.



Question — In your reference to the ‘Great White Fleet’, I wonder if you could elaborate more on what was involved in bringing that about?

Stuart Macintyre — Deakin thought that the War Office in London took Australia for granted. As the British came under more pressure, through the race to build Dreadnoughts and the increasing strength of the Germany Navy in particular, the British were being forced to withdraw more of their fleet to the home waters to guarantee the protection of Britain, and were thereby running down their Pacific fleet. And Deakin believed—and this was demonstrated 35 years later when Singapore fell—that the Far East would be dispensable if there was to be a national emergency. Australia at this time was providing finance for the building and the maintenance of the Royal Navy. Deakin wanted, in return, clearer guarantees about those ships being in Australian waters should they be needed, and he was told that he couldn’t have that guarantee. So he had the idea of the invitation to the United States, which was a strictly irregular one, and horrified people in Whitehall because it represented a Dominion conducting an independent foreign policy.

The invitation was essentially to show to the British that there was more than one friend that Australia could call on. And if you read the public coverage of it, there

was a strong notion of the United States as a friend across the other side of the Pacific, and there was also a strong racial element, as they were from the same Anglo-Saxon descent. The visit from the US fleet was very popular, but it was meant to be flying the flag and suggesting to the British that if they didn't do something, Australia might transfer its friendship elsewhere. There was never any danger of that, and if you look at the correspondence between London and Washington, they were both aware of what Deakin was up to.

Question — Was it an actual formal invitation, in writing?

Stuart Macintyre — Yes, indeed.

Question — Regarding the Australian and British issue, do you think Deakin remained equally Australian and British?

Stuart Macintyre — It stretches our imagination, doesn't it, to think that someone can be a strong Australian nationalist and a strong British nationalist, but Deakin was. I suppose an analogy would be that you can be a strong Queenslander and also a strong Australian, and generally you don't see any contradiction between those loyalties. That's very much the way that Deakin thought of these, as one loyalty nestled within the other, with a very strong idea of Australia as an offshoot of an older parent society and inheriting both its institutions and its ideals, and in some ways realising its ideals in a way that they were not being realised in the home country.

When Deakin first went to London in 1887, and even more strongly when he went back in 1900 to negotiate the passage of the Commonwealth Constitution through the British Parliament, he was very critical of British society, particularly high society. He was horrified by the slums and the vice, but he was also horrified by the ruling class, which he thought were showing signs of imperial decay. But he was always a strong imperialist. He was an imperial federationist. The idea that he proposed in 1907—that you could have a secretariat that would co-ordinate the dominions—is an example of that. So his loyalty to Britain was loyalty to an ideal as much as it was an admiration of a society that actually existed.

Question — He obviously felt tension between the two, even though they reinforced each other. I just wondered whether his unease, his inability to keep the two together, ever really bothered him, or whether he just accepted it.

Stuart Macintyre — There were certainly signs of annoyance with the British politicians and civil servants whom he dealt with, but I don't think it ever strained his fundamental loyalty to the Empire, and that's the distinction I think he was drawing. He thought of this often in familial terms, and his was a loyalty based on blood and ideas and sentiment and everything else; the fact that a member of the family was misbehaving did not alter the relationship that you had with them, so to speak.

Question — You made no reference to his position on the First World War. Was he strongly involved? Was he detached?

Stuart Macintyre — He had retired from Parliament by the time the First World War broke out. He had surrendered the leadership of the Liberals, as they were called—the

fused party—although he supported the war effort. And his attempt to speak at the meeting on the second conscription referendum demonstrated his belief that it was a war in which Australia had to be involved, but by that time his capacity to make a public statement was pretty limited.

Question — Did the idea of a bill of rights originate with Deakin?

Stuart Macintyre — I don't think so. I can't think of any particular statement by him on it, though he did take a keen interest in the American Constitution. He was very much an upholder of the British Constitution and constitutional principles, in which codification of a bill of rights was unnecessary. I am not aware that he was ever attracted to the idea of a separate bill of rights, though someone may be able to correct me on this.
