

Alfred Deakin

(1856–1919)

Australia's 2nd Prime Minister



Terms of office

24 September 1903 to 27 April 1904 • 5 July 1905 to 13 November 1908 • 2 June 1909 to 29 April 1910



Reluctant lawyer, reluctant politician

Deakin first met David Syme, the Scottish-born owner of *The Age* newspaper, in May 1878, as the result of their mutual interest in spiritualism. Soon after, Syme hired the reluctant lawyer on a trial basis, and he made an immediate impression. Despite repeatedly emphasising how 'laborious' journalism could be, Deakin was good at it, able to churn out leaders, editorials, investigative articles and reviews as the occasion demanded.

Syme wielded enormous clout, able to make and break governments in colonial Victoria and, after 1901, national governments. A staunch advocate of protection for local industry, he 'connived' at Deakin's political education, converting his favourite young journalist, a free-trader, into a protectionist. As Deakin later acknowledged, 'I crossed the fiscal Rubicon', providing a first clear indication of his capacity for political pragmatism--his willingness to reshape his beliefs and 'liberal' principles if and when the circumstances required it. Radical MLA David Gaunson dismissed him as nothing more than a 'puppet', 'the poodle dog of a newspaper proprietor'.

Syme was the catalyst for the start of Deakin's political career in 1879–80. After two interesting false starts, Deakin was finally elected in July 1880, during the same year that a clairvoyant predicted he would soon embark on a life-changing journey to London to participate in a 'grand tribunal'. Deakin did not forget what he described as 'extraordinary information', and in 1887 he represented Victoria at the Colonial Conference in London. The weeks spent there, when his imposing personality and articulate arguments impressed a number of Britain's most senior politicians, foreshadowed the 'federal story' to come.

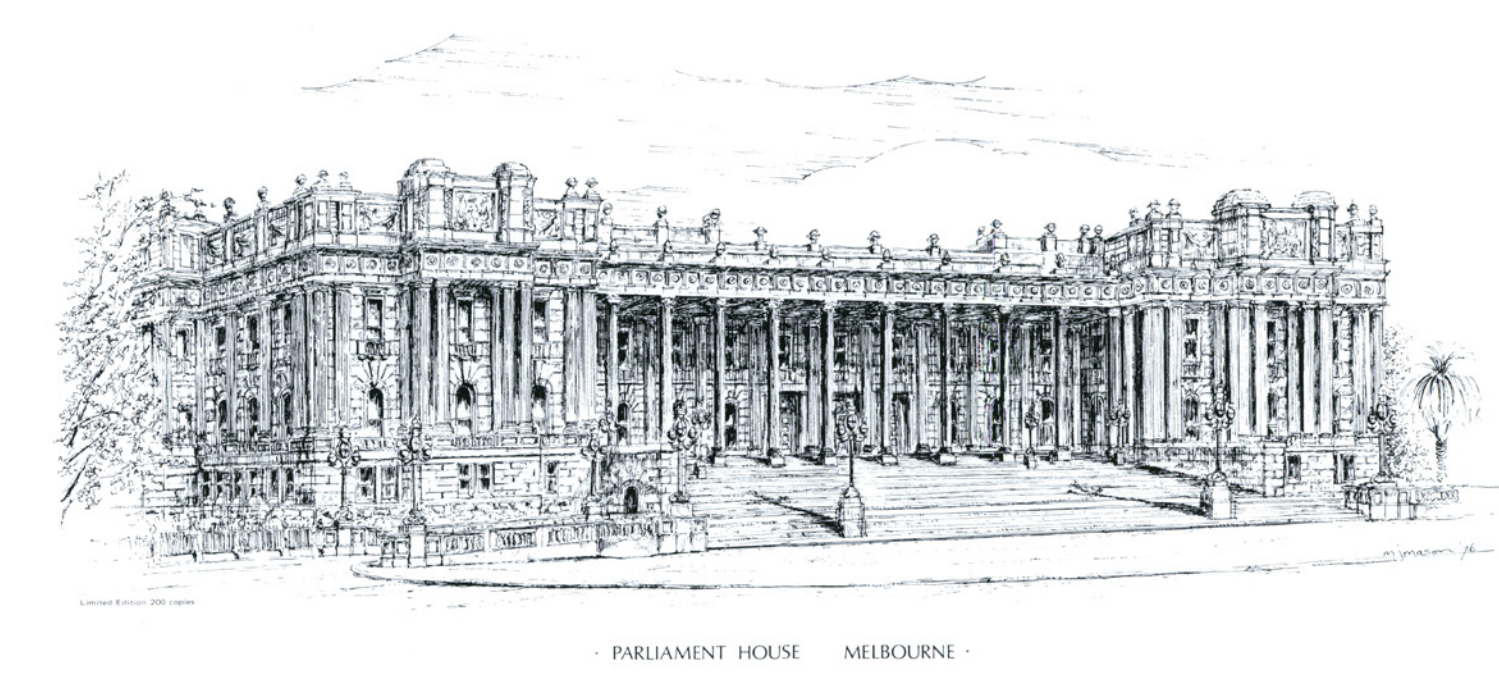
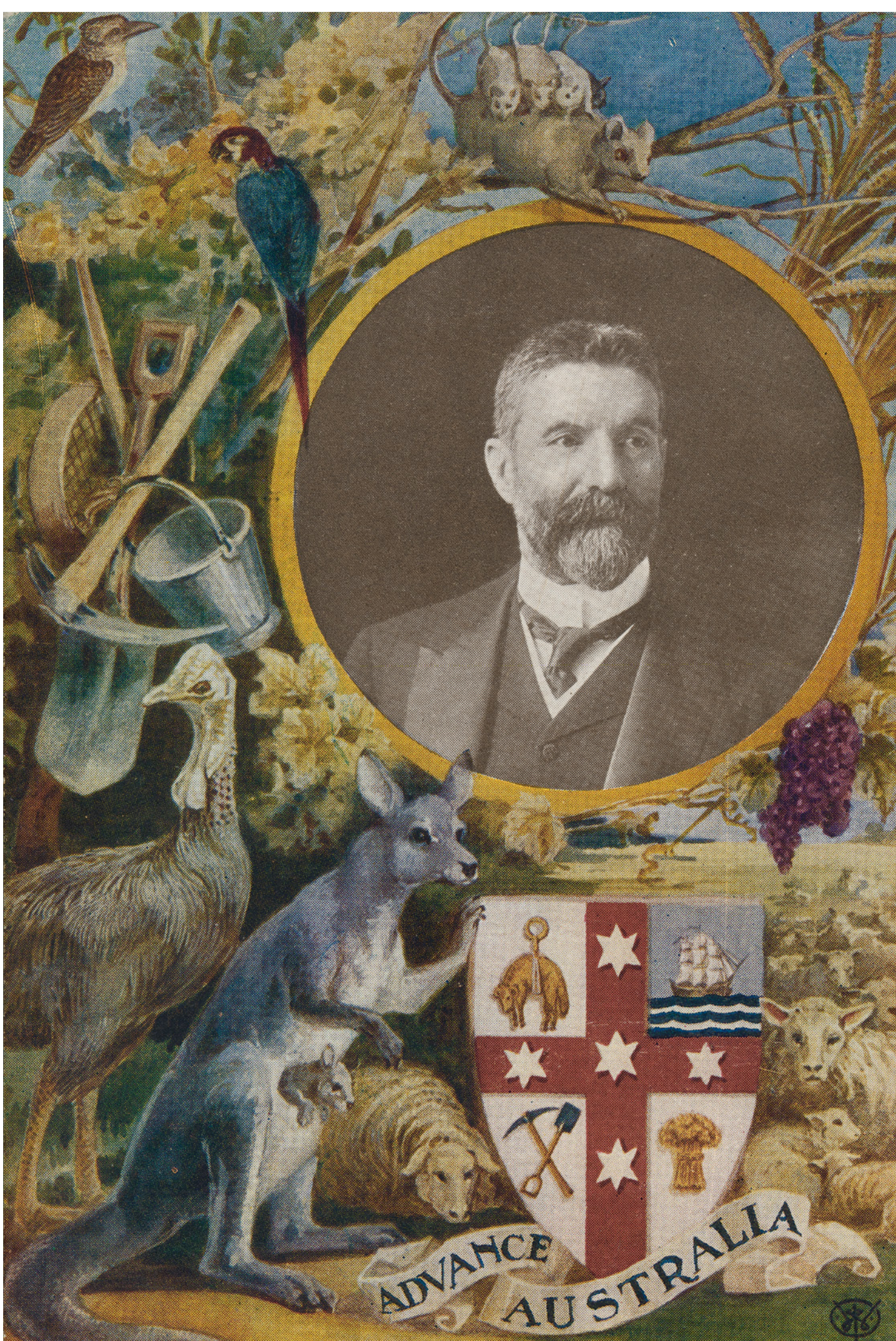
Throughout the 1880s, however, it was on the floor of the Victorian Legislative Assembly that he gained invaluable experience. His rise to prominence came quickly, perhaps too quickly. Between March 1883 and November 1890 he held ministerial office in, and became joint leader of a coalition government. Deakin's consummate skill as a negotiator impressed parliamentary colleagues of all stripes, as did his keen interest in public works programs, especially those relating to irrigation, where he chaired a Royal Commission that produced ground-breaking legislation.

In prosperous times, the conservative Duncan Gillies/Deakin government won the elections of 1886 and 1889. British capital poured in, doubling Victoria's public debt and exposing the colony to the worst effects of a severe economic depression. In late 1889, land values began to fall and, when the housing bubble burst, there was widespread, long-lasting damage.

Deakin had 'speculated heavily in the rush to be rich', investing his savings as well as his father's and losing both. His father died not long after. Deakin repaid his debts, though critics felt he was implicated in corrupt business dealings. He later successfully defended some of the worst offenders in court.

Amidst these boom and bust years of the 1880s, Deakin developed 'an inner reserve that few penetrated'. No-one, neither his wife nor political colleagues, had any inkling of the dimensions of his inner life given full expression in the confines of his home study. There, he had begun a 'Spiritual Diary Personal and Mundane', a 'Book of Praer and Praise' (the most intimate expression of his spiritual beliefs), a 'Gospel' according to the poet William Wordsworth and his 'Clues', a 27-year project.

The year 1884 was key. He made the momentous decision to 'find out God' through his own intense study of those heroic figures of the past who exhibited divine insight.



Sources

Portrait of Alfred Deakin by Johnstone O'Shannessy & Co, 21 July 1886, National Library of Australia, nla.obj:228183988 • Victorian Parliament House, 1950-1965, National Library of Australia, nla.obj:226157884
Council chamber, © Copyright Parliament of Victoria • David Syme and Co, *The Arrival of Mr Alfred Deakin*, 1887, Illustrated Australian News
Portrait of Alfred Deakin by Bradley & Ruthton, 1880-1900, National Library of Australia, nla.obj:226184109
Parliament of Victoria Doorway, © Copyright Parliament of Victoria



PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA
DEPARTMENT OF PARLIAMENTARY SERVICES

PARLIAMENTARY
LIBRARY
INFORMATION ANALYSIS ADVICE