

Alfred Deakin

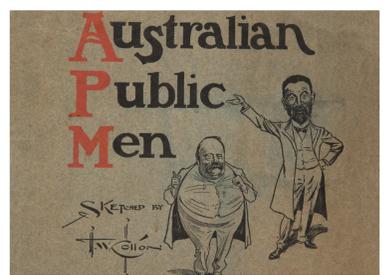
(1856–1919)

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



A father of federation, a family man

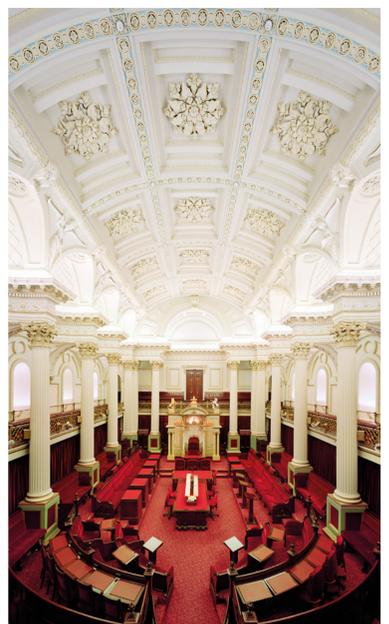
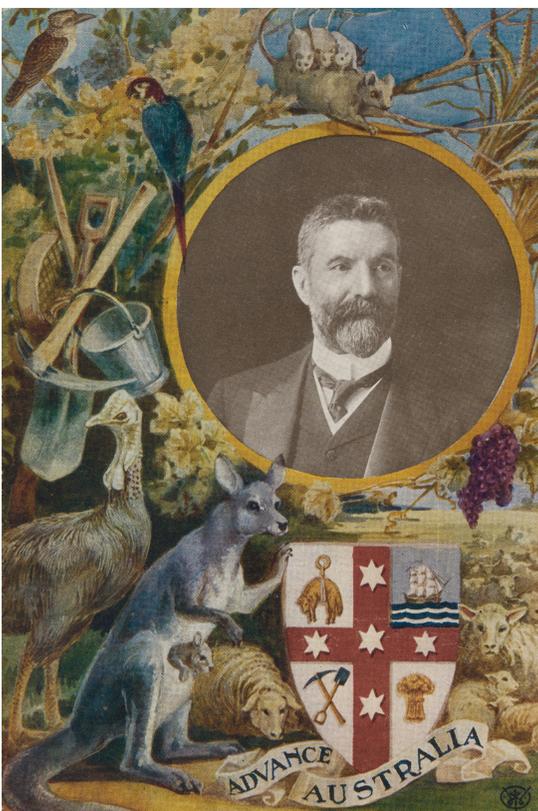
When a no-confidence vote terminated Deakin's conservative coalition government in October 1890, amid allegations of corruption and culpable excess, he was forced to reinvent himself. It was not easy. His diaries indicate just how deeply troubled he was by the circumstances of his political fall from grace, his dire financial predicament, spiritual unease and a lack of confidence in his community's desire to achieve social progress through just legislation. Historian Stuart Macintyre suggests that Deakin's occupation of the Victorian parliamentary backbench for the duration of the 1890s was probably 'an act of penance for his earlier profligacy'.

To make matters worse, at the beginning of the decade the relative tranquillity of domestic life collapsed when all family members had to withstand a 'horrid misunderstanding' between the two most important women in Deakin's life, his wife Pattie and sister Kate. Conflict had been simmering for years because of Pattie's belief, probably valid, that her spinster sister-in-law had been accorded too large a role in the raising of the Deakin children—of whom, by Christmas Day 1891, there were three daughters (Ivy, Stella and the yuletide baby Vera). The tension endured.

Confronted by this turmoil in both his public and private lives, somehow Deakin managed to give shape to the crucial role he would play in the achievement of Australian nationhood. At the first two important Federation gatherings—in Melbourne (February 1890) and Sydney (March/April 1891)—Deakin made a big impression on his inter-colonial colleagues. His speech in Melbourne perfectly distilled the essence of the challenge ahead: 'We must direct much of the loyalty which is now attached to individual colonies to a central ideal of the national life of Australia, so that our countrymen shall exhibit their loyalty to the nation, and the nation only'. Establishing a productive relationship with Edmund Barton in NSW, Deakin dedicated himself to the task of publicising the Federal idea and building national sentiment.

Even when Federation's stocks slumped in the middle 1890s, Deakin maintained his purpose and direction in the pursuit of a goal which he privately believed had been blessed by 'Divine Providence'. Victoria was consistently the most enthusiastic colony towards the Federation idea, but there were formidable doubters, none more influential than David Syme and *The Age*. Deakin converted Syme, probably with the speech he delivered in Bendigo on 15 March 1898 at the annual conference of the Australian Natives' Association, one of this country's finest-ever political speeches.

While driving himself relentlessly for the Federal cause in a watershed decade, Deakin's hours in the study, deep into the night, produced an influential book, *Temple and Tomb in India* (1893) on Indian irrigation and cultural practices, three new 'Gospels' including one entitled 'Personal Experiences on Spiritism', and the manuscript for his remarkable 'Federal Story' which, when finally published in 1944, was acknowledged as the finest available account of Federation.



Sources

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