

# 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



## Australia's greatest prime minister?

The difficulty in comparing the relative merits of Australia's 29 Prime Ministers is that the chronological span of the office now stretches to almost 120 years. The first seven Prime Ministers were all members of the historic first Commonwealth Parliament in 1901. Their Australian nation was in its infancy. The validity of comparisons across a century is questionable—times change, cultural values evolve, sometimes discernibly in a generation, and communities of different eras are subjected to vastly different pressures, both local and global.

In the small number of comparative assessments we have of Australia's Prime Ministers, Alfred Deakin is always placed in the top few, largely based on achievements in the years from 1905 to 1908. His first biographer Walter Murdoch, a good friend, had reservations about Deakin's lifetime engagement with spiritism but he assessed his national contribution in terms that most historians still endorse: 'Australia would be a name of different meaning today if he had not lived ... he stamped his own ideals on the mind of his country'. Twenty years on, novelist Vance Palmer (another, younger contemporary), Australia's preeminent cultural commentator in the 1940s, put his finger on Deakin's impact within his community when recalling that, even in the dark shadows of the last years, he was 'a figure regarded with affection and even reverence. Deakin, it was felt, was the ideal Australian statesman'.

Australians are still nervous about the public performances of its political leaders, especially when overseas. We don't want them to embarrass us. In his three visits to England on political business—in 1887, 1900 and 1907—Deakin strode the international stage, an articulate and charismatic representative of the new Commonwealth in the south. When he was offered Imperial honours he steadfastly refused, numerous times, feeling that acceptance might compromise his assertion of an Australian stance at the British Empire bargaining table.

With Deakin, however, there are several inescapable, inconvenient truths: from his earliest political days, he displayed a pragmatism that infuriated opponents, who called it opportunism, and disconcerted allies; he developed a liking for power that skewed his judgement to the extent that he aligned himself in his last prime ministership with those conservative politicians whom he had always opposed; he wrote, anonymously, an influential column for a British newspaper for the first 14 years of Federation involving him in a clear conflict of interest of which he seemed oblivious; and when the middle ground of Australian politics, his brand of Liberalism, began to evaporate with a surging Labor Party, he could not respond with a strategic restatement of the 'ideals' that had established his reputation. We now know that his memory loss had become acute.

By any measure, however, the sum of the valid criticisms of Deakin's career is dwarfed by the scale of his achievements in public life and the precocity and courageous ambition of his inner life. If Deakin is not Australia's greatest Prime Minister, he is undoubtedly its most compelling.



## Sources

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