

Alfred Deakin

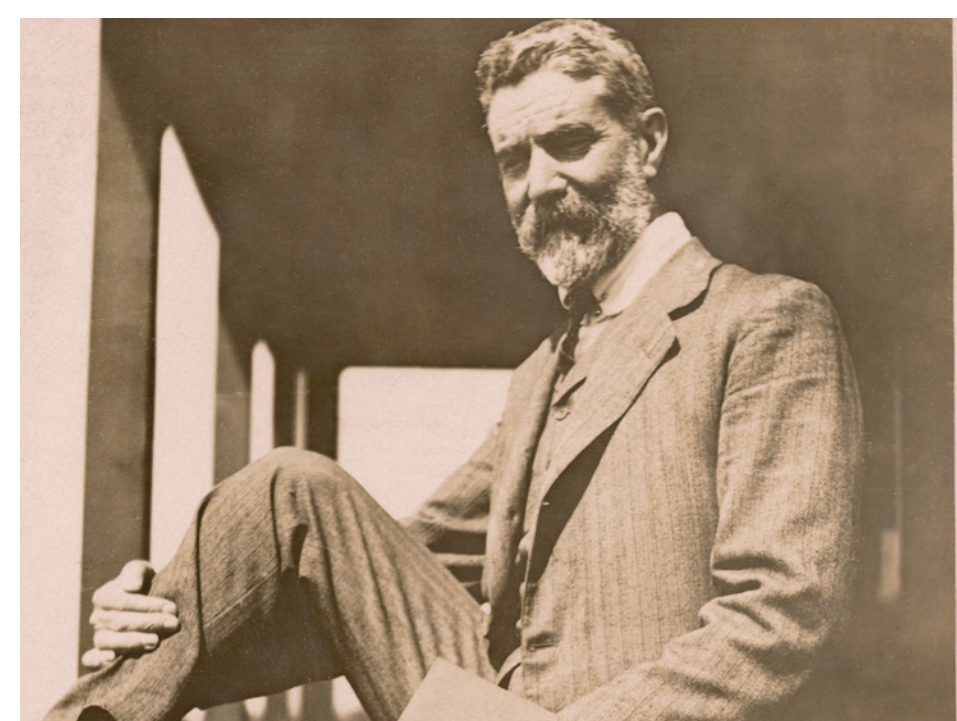
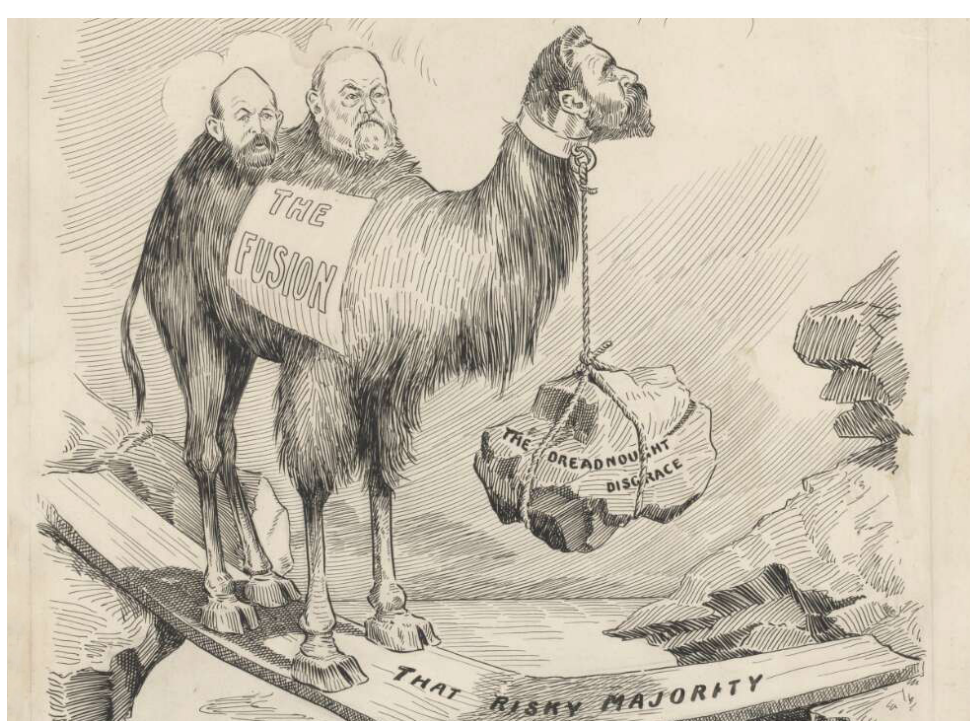
(1856–1919)

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



Between temple and tomb

When Deakin made the decision in 1901 to use his former legal casebooks solely for the outpourings of his private life, it had symbolic significance. He had left law as a sometime profession and taken his seat in the historic first Commonwealth Parliament, but he was not about to let his intoxicating public life interfere with the evolution of his spiritual education.

In the first decade of the Federation, despite a huge workload as Attorney-General and then as Prime Minister, Deakin continued his quest apace. Out of prime ministerial office for 15 months, 1904–5, he completed what was his last Gospel, 'Ten Letters' (on Stoicism and Idealism), only to become even more resolutely introspective as he sought to understand the nature of spiritual experience. Mustering relevant 'Clues' and 'Materials', he pursued a courageous Bunyanesque trail in search of the Truth, the Soul and the destiny of humankind.

The clash of his two lives—public and private—was dramatically expressed in 1904 when he wrote: 'Whether I give strength or have influence upon others I do not know but none of them reach me now except momentarily and by sympathy ... I act alone, live alone and think alone ...'. Insomnia had become a chronic problem and he also suffered severe indigestion. Deakin hated banquets, according to his granddaughter, Judith Harley, but big public occasions came with the job description.

At the peak of his power, in charge of a high-performance government, he gave serious thought to quitting politics altogether. He didn't, instead buying six acres of land at Point Lonsdale on the Victorian coast where, in 1907, he had a two-storeyed, timbered holiday cottage built to his wife Pattie's design. He named it 'Ballara', the Aboriginal spelling of Ballarat (his federal electorate), said to mean 'a resting place'. It became Deakin's place of seclusion and escape, where he was free to swim, walk, read, rest, write and be with family.

There was grim irony in the fact that, about the time that Ballara took its restorative place in Deakin's life, he began to experience memory loss. His political performances and judgement slowly began to suffer. During the six months that the (first) Andrew Fisher Labor Government held office, from late 1908 to June 1909, Deakin made the decision to sever a loose alliance with Labor that had proven so beneficial, and align himself with parliamentary conservatives committed to anti-socialism. He felt that he could harness their more extreme opinions while staying true to his 'radical' liberalism. The 'Fusion' experiment, in government for less than a year, proved disastrous. Deakin was called a 'Judas'. When the Fusion went to the polls in April 1910, with Deakin confident of being returned, it was crushed by Labor. Indeed, Fisher's second Government enjoyed the first majorities in both Houses since Federation.

In the midst of these last difficult months in office, Deakin heard another profound voice—a 'monition' he called it extolling him to 'Finish your job & turn in'. As he had in the past, he acted purposefully on the mystic instruction, struggling on as Opposition leader to January 1913, when he mercifully retired. He had experienced his first decisive breakdown in September 1912 and he was, he confessed in his journal, 'a wreck'.

The twilight years of Deakin's life, as Pattie sought to find effective treatment for her beloved husband's rapid decline, were desperately sad. He dismissed his last journal entries, with their 'tangle of words, words, words', as nothing but 'babble'.



Sources

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Portrait of Alfred Deakin seated on a veranda holding a book, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-130655508 • H. W. Mobsby, Australia pavilion, Panama Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco, 1915, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-151818877



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