‘Developmental Social Liberalism’ - Alfred Deakin and water resources politics in Australia.

Ben Rankin

The Summer Scholarship project
The proposed research project drew on earlier research I had undertaken into the role of Alfred Deakin as a Minister in the Victorian Legislative Assembly during the 1880’s and 90’s. During this period one of Deakin’s largest responsibilities was colonial water supply. His influence over Victorian water policy was profound and Deakin’s widely recognised reports as well as his Irrigation Act 1886 (the first of its kind in Australia) are prominent examples of his authority on the subject. There was however a relative absence of references to Deakin and water policy after this period and this was curious when his influence in Victoria was so pronounced.

The research intended to investigate the nature of Deakin’s involvement in water resources politics during the federal debates and later in the Commonwealth Parliament. Specifically, I considered that Deakin had amassed such an extensive knowledge in terms of water resources policy that this almost certainly had to crossover into the federal sphere. In this regard, the research was focussed on examining his role in questions of inter-jurisdictional water politics with a particular emphasis on irrigated agricultural development in the Murray-Darling Basin. The ultimate objective of the research was to produce an article for publication in a refereed journal.

The research
Initially, I developed a background of research relevant to Deakin’s involvement in Victorian water politics. I put much of this research together prior to leaving for Canberra and this material largely directed the questions for my research whilst at the APMC. Upon arriving in Canberra, I essentially broke the research project into four stages:

- The first stage concentrated on the writings about Deakin including the biographies by Murdoch and La Nauze and Deakin’s personal account of early colonial politics titled ‘The Crisis in Victorian Politics – a personal retrospect’, these materials were in the Australian Prime Ministers Centre library which meant I had unfettered access whenever I required them. This work was particularly beneficial to understanding the personal and philosophical motivations behind Deakin’s politics.

- Stage two of the project carefully examined Deakin’s published writings on water resources which included two Victorian reports, a rare article about irrigation in Australia sourced in the National Library and a volume of previously published articles while Deakin was on tour in India known as ‘Irrigated India’ (which the Australian Prime Ministers Centre happily made available). In terms of the overall research this demonstrated the extent Deakin’s knowledge on the subject of water resources which had particularly been the result of his overseas travels.

- Stage three closely examined Deakin’s recorded speeches on water resources and irrigation during the federal debates and in the Commonwealth House of Representatives which were easily accessible in the Australian Prime Ministers Centre library. These eloquent speeches (a well-known quality of Deakin) were instrumental in developing the argument that ultimately connected Deakin’s role in the federal debates on water to his earlier speeches in the Victorian parliament.
The final stage of the project effectively involved tying together the various threads I had encountered, and I realised that there were three fundamental points underlying Deakin’s water policy:

1. Deakin had witnessed the importance of irrigated agriculture and effective water policy in countries around the world and saw agricultural growth as integral to continuing national economic development.

2. He considered that building and strengthening rural/regional communities was fundamental to this growth and the benefits to families in these regions would be the greatest achievement of these initiatives.

3. Deakin’s understood water resources and irrigation as prime objects requiring doses of state paternalism combined with overseas technological advances to procure specific economic and social objectives. In this respect Deakin can be regarded as a development social liberal.

Publication of the research
I recently finished drafting the article and it is currently at the editing stage with the intention of being submitted to a refereed journal for review sometime this year. More broadly, the research has consolidated the work for my PhD and will ultimately add significantly to the thesis.

Biography
Ben is currently in his second year as PhD candidate at Swinburne University in Melbourne. He previously graduated from Monash University with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours). His PhD topic (Water politics in Victoria) is broadly focussed on the development of water law and policy in the State of Victoria between 1851 and the present. The central contention is that early legislative and administrative initiatives were entrenched with specific economic and social objectives. These objectives are particularly inconsistent with more recent neo-classical reforms to Victorian water policy. The thesis incorporates a path-dependent analysis to demonstrate the existence of substantial barriers to legislative and administrative reform.

Ben’s research interests are Australian federal and state politics, Australian political history, the influence of governing institutions, and water resources policy reforms that reflect the presence of specific economic and environmental factors in developed nations. Ben is currently undertaking a research fellowship at the Victorian Parliamentary Library with the intention of producing a collaborative work towards the end of 2011.

March 2011