The Strange Political Death of Alfred Deakin
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The enigma
What are we to make of Alfred Deakin, Australia’s second prime minister, and arguably the most enigmatic of all 27?

The closer one gets to the elusive Deakin, the more the picture is clouded by paradox and contradiction. A most secretive man who dabbled in spiritualism and worked as an anonymous political commentator for a newspaper during his three terms as Prime Minister, Deakin spent more than three decades in public life, yet he confided repeatedly in his diaries how he longed for privacy. A punctiliously polite and courteous man to even the most intransigent political foe, and known affectionately as “Affable Alfred”, Deakin’s posthumously published writings on the Federation process, in which he was a key player, reveal a sardonic and at times mordant mind at work evaluating, often waspishly, those with whom he came into contact. Outwardly eloquent, socially poised and widely read, Deakin was, unusual for a political leader, given to deep periods of introspection and reflection that verged on self-doubt.

There is no question as to Deakin’s paramount significance in both the Federation movement and the establishment of the Commonwealth in its crucial first decade, yet the picture we are left with is tantalisingly incomplete. We know now, more than 90 years after his death, that his faculties were in rapid and irreversible decline by the time he retired from politics in 1913. But, for all his undoubted achievements, Alfred Deakin was already politically dead when he walked away from parliament; the party of which he was once the driving force was no more, the social liberalism which he had championed so fervently was but a fading ember, derided and left to wither by those to whom he had bequeathed what remained of his political edifice, and even his much vaunted belief in principle above expediency appears hollow and time-worn.

If Deakin the historical figure appears in some ways an ambiguous figure, this is not so much to impose a judgment as it is to acknowledge that Deakin himself cultivated ambiguity as an essential part of his persona, both public and private. For example, his official secretary when he was Prime Minister, Malcolm Shepherd, recorded in his memoirs how Deakin was frequently sent books and articles to read by members of the public to whom a deliberately worded reply would be sent acknowledging receipt and assuring the sender that he “would lose no time in reading it.” He was, in his ambiguities, often oblivious of the effect it might have on others taking him at his literal word. His long-time colleague and supporter, John Forrest, who had hoped to succeed Deakin as Liberal leader, sought Deakin’s advice about contesting the leadership and Deakin duly responded that he “approved” of such a course. Forrest was shattered, however, when Deakin voted for Joseph Cook in the ballot, explaining to Forrest that approval did not necessarily constitute support.

So, too, in his political relations did Deakin display a characteristic ambiguity. In the first decade of the Commonwealth, Deakin was effectively the kingmaker – occasionally he wore the crown, and when he chose not to wear it, it was he who bestowed it. It was Deakin who paved the way for Chris Watson to lead the first Labor government in 1904 and, when that short-lived administration ran into trouble, it was he who arranged the tactical support from among his own followers for his arch-enemy, the Free Trader George Reid, to take the prime ministerial reins. It was a typically ambiguous Deakin speech, open to all sorts of interpretation, that brought Reid undone with Deakin arguing that it was merely a “friendly warning”, and yet making no attempt to deny the interpretation put on it by the press as a “notice to quit”. Deakin, in his brutal removal of Reid, did so without apparent concern for those of his own supporters whom he had persuaded to join with Reid in coalition.
Indeed, the entire political career of Alfred Deakin is neatly bookended by ambiguity. His election to the Victorian parliament at a by-election in 1879, when he was but 22, was momentous in itself, but not nearly so momentous as the explosive effect of his first speech, when he promptly announced his resignation owing to irregularities in the poll. Irregular it was, to be sure, but Deakin’s apparent high-mindedness might just as easily have been directed at the entire political climate of the time, about which he wrote in *The Crisis in Victorian Politics, 1879-1881*. What Deakin does not say, and about which contemporary press reports had plenty to say, was that in addition to voting irregularities and rampant sectarianism, vote buying and political blackmail were also prevalent, and in Deakin’s particular case, voters were threatened with no railway connection if the preferred Liberal candidate (that is, Deakin) were not elected. Even then, in the surprise announcement of his inaugural speech, he had kept his cards to himself. The then Premier and his political leader, Graham Berry, mildly reproved Deakin after his resignation: “It’s all very well for you. It puts you on a pinnacle. But what of the party if you lose them a seat at this juncture?”

Deakin, of course, came back, but not at his first attempt – his apparent distaste for political horse-trading quickly overcome. The next 33 years, however, were spent in and out of office in Victoria and the early Commonwealth and, in the crucial period in the 1890s, when Deakin devoted much time and energy to the Federal cause, his private member status in the Victorian parliament was not without ambiguity. Having held office in the colonial government that presided over rampant speculation followed by a devastating financial collapse in Victoria, massive bank failures and a depression that brought misery and ruin to many – and Deakin himself was not immune to significant financial loss through injudicious speculation – he managed, unlike many of his erstwhile colleagues, to remain politically solvent, albeit tarnished.

**The disappearing constituency**

Deakin is best remembered now as the driving force behind the Federal movement, a status not wholly unconnected with his having written the standard account of proceedings, but not published until 1944, a quarter of a century after his death. Certainly, he played a key, even heroic, role, and was the intellectual power house of those first Commonwealth governments that showcased the nascent Australian democracy to the world as a progressive social laboratory extraordinaire, pioneering the secret ballot, universal adult suffrage, an advanced system of social welfare and compulsory industrial arbitration that not only recognised, but institutionalised, class conflict, and provided a means for its adjudication. Yet for all the textbook affirmation of Deakin as a visionary social liberal, his constituency was in decline from the time of his first prime ministership in 1903. Dependent on the votes of working people as a counter to the conservative Free Traders, Deakin’s Protectionists never bettered their peak vote at the very first election in 1901 when they gained 44 per cent nationally, becoming the largest party in the new House of Representatives with 31 seats to Free Trade’s 28 and Labor’s 14. By the 1903 election, the votes of the three parties were almost equal, and the seats divided between Protectionists (26), Free Trade (25) and Labor (23), which prompted Deakin’s much quoted line about the impossibility of a cricket match with three elevens in the field. Deakin’s sporadic alliance with Labor sparked a rebellion in his own ranks with the formation of a conservative Protectionist “corner” whose members had more in common with the Free Traders than they did with their own party’s wing sympathetic to Labor. By the 1906 election, the Protectionists had become the smallest of the three parties as Labor continued to increase its strength, drawing support away from what had once been Protectionists strongholds for Deakin, especially in Victoria. Trapped between a growing Labor Party on the left and a resurgent conservative movement arising from the Free Traders on the right, Deakin’s political space had shrunk almost to the point of irrelevance: merger with the old enemy was the only path out of imminent oblivion – but in a sense that proved the death knell for what had become, in effect, the Deakinite hallmark, that peculiar amalgam of liberalism and state intervention that he had so stoutly and
eloquently defended in 1895, declaring that “the reconstructive element in Liberalism must in future come to the front”.

Deakin and Labor
Deakin saw a natural affinity with the rising Labor Party, and had expressed the hope of a formal merger, although there was also an ambivalence on Deakin’s part towards Labor: while he admired its social progressivism, he rejected its party discipline, especially the “pledge”, which bound all elected members to the decisions of Caucus. Deakin remained firmly of the opinion that members of parliament were elected to exercise their own judgment on issues rather than be bound by a simple majority decision; as such he was increasingly out of step with the rise of party discipline, begun by Labor but emulated to a lesser extent by the non-Labor parties as they organised to counter Labor. Certainly, the progressive legislative program of the first of the Barton-Deakin governments was essentially the product of the Protectionist-Labor alliance, but what was proposed as Deakin’s landmark blow for social liberalism, the so-called New Protection, which sought to link protective tariffs to wages and working conditions, was never fully realised, owing to constitutional difficulties and the need for political compromise.

The real problem for Deakin was that the old political alliances were fragmenting. As Labor grew in both strength and influence, so too did the forces opposed to Labor, most notably the employer groups. Whereas once many of them saw advantages in Deakin’s protectionism, the fiscal issue had been largely resolved half a decade into the new Commonwealth, and Reid’s astute repositioning of his Free Traders as “anti-socialists” in the 1906 election campaign reflected a growing polarisation in Australian politics. Not only were employer groups more likely now to align with Reid than with Deakin, but a new force had entered the fray – women, especially under the Australian Women’s National League which, while placing itself firmly in the liberal camp, was anti-Labor, anti-socialist and decidedly cool towards what they saw as Deakin’s pro-Labor tendencies.

Even as the battle lines were shaping up even more clearly after the inconclusive 1906 election, Deakin, in office but dependent on Labor support, still looked to Labor as a natural ally, even proposing as late as 1908 not just an alliance but a coalition. But Labor, disappointed with Deakin’s compromise on New Protection, had had enough and voted to withdraw support from Deakin’s government. Deakin, by now in a weak political position with his own followers, albeit themselves divided, numerically smaller than both Labor and Reid’s conservatives, had no option but to enter into merger talks with his old rivals, the conservatives. The result, not entirely a happy one for Deakin, was the Fusion of 1909, the advent of which triggered a backlash that delivered victory to Labor in 1910 – the first majority government in the Commonwealth and in control of both houses. By the time of the next election in 1913, by which time Deakin had retired, The Fusion, now known as the Liberal Party, was dominated by conservatives and little remained of Deakin’s social liberalism.

It was a sad ending to a distinguished career, but for all Deakin’s accomplishments, a curious ambiguity remains attached both to him and his legacy.

Into the twilight
It was a balmy early summer’s evening in 1912 as Alfred Deakin made his way down the stone steps of the Victorian parliament into Spring Street for the last time as a sitting member. For more than three decades he had sat in that building, first as a member of the Victorian colonial parliament, and since 1901 as a member of the Commonwealth parliament, three times the prime minister of the new Federation. There were people scurrying about the city streets, but a general air of relaxation was apparent as Christmas fast approached. It was also only a day or two away from the summer solstice as the Melbourne evening slid gently into the long southern twilight. But for the bearded, hatted figure who made his way down those steps in company with his fellows, an eerie inner
twilight had already descended, not only engulfing and blurring the once-sharp mind of Deakin but also enveloping his political world which had all but vanished. Within the space of two short years as Deakin slowly descended into a dark and silent world of his own, the world that most people knew would also be gone, along with what had seemed the solid certitudes and eternal verities of an age that would last forever.

Boarding the train for Geelong, which would then take him on to Queenscliff and his newly built retreat, ‘Ballara’, at nearby Point Lonsdale, Deakin would recline in his usual window seat, as the train steamed away from the busy terminus, snaking its way through the densely peopled industrial areas west of Melbourne and onto the flat coastal plain that led west. Whereas his thoughts had once been about matters of state, party and parliamentary tactics, this time his mind was free to roam unencumbered as a new and uncertain future beckoned. Just what was going through that mind as the train headed into the sunset, the jagged outline of the You Yangs to the north as the train approached Geelong, is not known. Perhaps he dozed as the train rattled and swayed; his body was tired and he was clearly aware that his faculties, most especially his once sharp memory, were failing. Behind him was a career already impressive in the short annals of the Australian Commonwealth of which he had been not only a father but an architect and builder; but behind him also was an uncertain political legacy and a whole world that was already fading. Those whom he had counted as friends were now enemies; those who now sat with him were the very same ones he had fought, before and after federation. If a sustaining creed had been his conception of a particularly Victorian liberalism – defined by Deakin just 17 years earlier as ‘resistance to and destruction of class privileges’ – then that had been cast aside, as those with whom he was now allied were ardent defenders of such privilege.

Politically, the Alfred Deakin who rode that evening train to Queenscliff was a walking shadow whose hour on the stage had passed. Not only was he frail of body and in mental decline, he was already dead. The past three years had been difficult for Deakin, his first concerted spell in opposition, and leading a party in which his former enemies were in the majority. But in its very creation it represented a repudiation and betrayal of principles by Deakin. A Punch cartoon commenting on the 1910 election result was prescient in its depiction of Deakin as politically dead, after having publicly lamented that ‘the public life is not worth living’. As he sits forlornly contemplating the election results, he is surrounded by the ghosts of his associates who have lost their seats, who say: ‘That’s all very well for you, Alfred: you’re still alive. We’d give a bit to be resuscitated’.

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