

Geoists in History: ALFRED DEAKIN (1857 - 1919)

By Karl Williams



“The whole of the people have the right of the ownership of land and the right to share in the value of land itself, though not to share in the fruits of land which properly belong to the individuals by whose labour they are produced.”

Given the deplorable state of federal politics in Australia today, replete with personal attacks and obstructionist tactics, it's almost impossible to imagine that a political leader could ever have been highly respected and regarded throughout his entire public life by both sides of the political spectrum. But Alfred Deakin was no ordinary politician and no ordinary man. His stature and renown led to him being offered many honours and awards, including a knighthood; however his modesty led him to refuse all these. Among his long list of achievements are the recognition of him as the intellectual leader of the movement for Australian federation and his election as the second prime minister of Australia (and the fifth and seventh!). A brilliant statesman, Deakin excelled in a defining period of history predisposed to his adroit negotiating skills that were fixed on compromise & conciliation and augmented by his natural powers of persuasion.

“Affable Alfred”, as he became known as in adult life, was born in the inner Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy to old-fashioned, hard working parents who strove to give their only son the best education. His 8 years of secondary school were spent at the prestigious Melbourne Grammar School where he was able to indulge his voracious appetite for books. Here he was bestowed with his first great geoist influence in the form of the great Scottish historian, Thomas Carlyle, who became Deakin's prophet and lifelong influence. Carlyle, amongst many famous geoist utterances, had written “Who can or who could sell us the earth? Actually the earth belongs

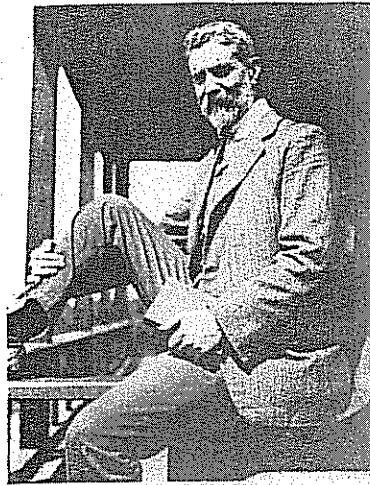
to these two: the almighty God and all his children who have ever worked on it or who will ever have to work on it. No generation of men can or could with even the highest solemnity and exertion sell the earth according to any other principle.”

Obtaining honours in algebra, geometry and history at school, he changed course to begin studying law at Melbourne University at the tender age of 14 and although he had no particular interest in law, his quick comprehension skills and superb memory enabled him to pass his course and to be admitted to the bar 5 years later. He readied himself for his life's mission by speaking frequently at the University Debating Club. During his university years, not wishing to be too great a burden to his father, he taught at schools, was a private tutor, and acted as bookkeeper and representative of his father in a printing establishment.

He had grown into a tall, slender, alert and decidedly handsome young man, still reading insatiably, but not suggesting to his tutors that he was marked for future distinction. In fact, he had such little enthusiasm for the law that he spent most of his time in his law chambers writing poetry, essays and literary criticism.

In 1878, the year after he began his near-briefless law career, a chance introduction changed his life's direction. Mind you, to be introduced to the press baron, David Syme (of the Melbourne Age newspaper, was no small matter. Syme, who

“I am a State land taxer from head to heel, but this Government makes no proposal for the addition of a Federal land tax. We are waiting on the States for the land, and responsibility rests with them.”



became a close friend, engaged him as a paid contributor of reviews, leaders, sub-leaders and general articles on politics, literature and miscellaneous topics.

In 1880 he edited the *Leader*, the *Age's* weekly. He excelled at journalism, which became his major occupation for some five years and provided a useful source of income for most of his life. His intellectual interests were a world away from the trash culture and infotainment of today. His voracious and wide ranging appetite for books and writing continued; his reading encompassing titles and authors as diverse as Plato, the *Bhagavad Gita* and George Meredith. To give just one example of his vast intellectual pursuits he published 'Temple and Tomb in India' (1893), an exploration of religion and architecture in India. He read everything that came his way in English literature, biography, history and philosophy, French in the original, and German and the classics in translation, and still found time to do an immense amount of writing himself, both in prose and verse.

It was later in 1880 that the still very young (23 years!) Deakin was elected into the Victorian parliament, from 1883 he began to hold high portfolios, and from 1885 to 1890 he was joint leader in a coalition government.

The young Deakin who entered parliament had now matured into an even more impressive figure. He was six feet (about 183 cm) tall, dark haired and dark eyed, and his handsome, alert face was fashionably bearded. He spoke rapidly in a rich, baritone voice which, he claimed, bore no trace of 'provincial' accent. Deakin had a charming manner, an engaging style, and a journalist's skill with narrative.

The political divide was very different in those days. Deakin had always been liberal in tendency; liberals at this time were similar to radicals in England in their belief in the breaking up of the big estates, a protective tariff and in having

the support of the working classes. He proved an able administrator, and he practised and polished the art of compromise. He introduced the Factories and Shops Act of 1885, a pioneer social measure based largely on British legislation that had impressed the royal commission of 1884. The act, though mutilated by the Legislative Council, provided for the regulation and inspection of factories, enforced sanitary regulations, limited the hours of work of females and youths, and compensated workers for injury.

He chaired the 1884 royal commission on irrigation, a cause he pressed with fervor, and it seems that the second geoist shaping might first have occurred with Deakin's close involvement with this issue. There had been much suffering from drought years, and a royal commission was appointed with Deakin as president. In December 1884 he went to America to see what was being done there. He returned in May 1885 and presented his report "Irrigation in Western America" which was received as a remarkable piece of accurate observation, and was immediately reprinted by the United States government. In 1886 he again became minister of water supply and succeeded in passing his irrigation bill. It was the beginning of a great movement in Australia, which it may not be too much to say has proved to be a great boon to our country. Deakin retained his interest in the subject for many years, publishing in 1887 his *Irrigation in Italy and Egypt*, and in 1893 *Irrigated India*.

Of course the pressing question concerned how such grand irrigation projects could be financed. To an open, inquiring mind, the answer was obvious – those landowners who enjoyed the staggering uplift in land values should pay, rather than the ordinary taxpayer. These were the glory days when the writings of Henry George were sweeping the world, as the monster best-seller "Progress and Poverty" had only been published in 1879.



Alfred Deakin as a young man

Thus it was that Deakin introduced the first legislation in Australia to promote an irrigation system. The bill broke with traditional English riparian law by placing ownership of natural waters under the Crown and provided for the construction of state-aided irrigation works by local trusts. In time, successful irrigation and water schemes became a feature of rural Victoria and Australia.

The third geoist life lesson Deakin learnt at this period was a bitter pill to swallow – the reality of the boom-bust land cycles caused, of course, by a taxation system encouraging speculation in land. In the year 1888 everything seemed prosperous in Victoria and the government like everyone else spent money extravagantly. Melbourne at this time was indeed marvelous and a massive inflow of British capital fuelled the Victorian boom. The coalition won the election of March 1889, but in 1890 the land boom was starting to waver and soon the bubble burst. Deakin, like many contemporaries of his social class, speculated heavily in the rush to be rich: he lost his own and his father's savings. Unlike many he repaid his debts. Nonetheless, the picture of him as an innocent intellectual unwittingly caught up in the brutal world of business seems too kind. As joint coalition leader he shared power and responsibility in a government whose own borrowing and investment policies contributed much to the onset of the collapse and the severity of the depression. As an individual investor he sought quick and easy profit with the rest of them.

Deakin in this respect was no wiser than his fellows, and there appears to be no evidence that he ever raised his voice against this extravagance. In November 1890 the government was defeated, and Deakin was not in office in a Victorian government again.

Australia, in the throes of a crippling bursting of a land bubble, was more than ready to absorb the geoist message, and Henry George's extended tour of Australia in 1890 was well-timed indeed. In those days of horse and buggy transport, an estimated 10,000 people clamoured to hear George at Melbourne's Exhibition Buildings. According to Deakin's biographer, Walter Murdoch, Deakin "avowed himself a disciple, in a general way, of Henry George".

Deakin was about to embark on his great life mission of cobbling together a group of disparate and oft-squabbling states into one nation, and there were many like Deakin who wanted Australia to begin its independent life free from the tyranny of British-style lords, barons, earls and dukes who owned vast estates and who keep their landless workers in a condition of near-servitude. One of the great attractions of geoist site rent collection is that it would force the so-called well connected "squatters", who had already legally misappropriated huge tracts of the best land, to put the land to optimal use. Site rent would force the landholder to put their land to appropriate use or else consign the land to those who would properly use it. "Bust up the big estates" therefore became a popular catch-cry in those times, and one echoed by Deakin himself.

The 1890's was the decade in which Deakin, free from party politics, threw himself into the cause of federation. It is too often overlooked in Australia today that in the 19th century most people thought that a single, united, federated Australia was an impossible dream due to serious colonial differences and self-centred squabbling politicians. We can truly ascribe "the miracle of federation" to the marvelous conciliatory skills, personal charm and persistence of Deakin.

In 1887 Deakin had made his first visit to England, being one of the four representatives of Victoria at the colonial conference. Deakin had taken a much bolder tone and had spoken of the difficulties the colonies had in dealing with the British ministry. He made a great impression in London, and if the conference did nothing else it brought home to the delegates of various Australian colonies the advantages that would accrue if they could speak with one voice. But federation was then still a long way off. The federation of the Australian colonies had long been his dream. If it could become more than a dream there was work to be done, and much of his time during the next 10 years was given to this cause.

Deakin's interest in Federation had been greatly stimulated at this Colonial Conference of 1887, where colonial division thwarted attempts to overcome Imperial apathy. He attended all subsequent Federal conferences and conventions. He appears to have helped resolve differences between the prominent feuding politicians Duncan Gillies and Sir Henry Parkes, who convened the Australasian Federation Conference of 1890. Deakin was the youngest delegate to the National Australasian Convention of 1891 in Sydney, and he polled third in the popular election of ten Victorian delegates to the Australasian Federal Convention of 1897-98: in both he served on the constitutional committee. As a progressive liberal from a large colony he adopted a democratic stance on most issues. He opposed conservative plans for the indirect election of senators and sought a relatively weak 'States House' which he foresaw would be dominated by political parties. On the most vital constitutional issue of all, control of money bills, he tried to limit the Senate's power and make the House of Representatives supreme. He advocated wide taxation powers for the Commonwealth.

These efforts, and similar ones of Barton and others in New South Wales, took Federation out of the hands of parliamentarians, and helped to ensure its success. As chairman of the Federation League of Victoria and acknowledged leader and symbol of the cause in the colony, Deakin was the central figure in the referenda campaigns of 1898-99, when the Commonwealth bill was put to the popular test. His celebrated address at the A.N.A. banquet at Bendigo in March 1898 set the tone for the campaign, converting a hostile and suspicious, Age newspaper.

Thus it was that at the conventions of 1891, 1897 and 1898, Deakin was the leading figure. Between conferences, he worked to popularise the concept of federation and campaigned for its acceptance in colonial referenda. He then

fought hard to ensure acceptance of the proposed constitution by the Government of the United Kingdom. To him often fell the task of reconciling differences, and of finding ways out of apparently impossible difficulties.

At last only one obstacle remained in the form of Joseph Chamberlain, the colonial secretary, who asked that representatives of the colonies concerned should be sent to London to confer with him, and Deakin was selected to represent Victoria. The other leading delegates were Edmund Barton and Charles Kingston. The three were determined to consent to no amendments, but Chamberlain said the bill must be amended. The real difficulty was clause 74 relating to the high court, which was thought to go too close to severing ties with Britain. It was a long struggle but eventually a compromise was found, and it was decided that appeals from the high court should be by consent of the high court itself.

Thus it was Deakin's skills and knowledge relating to law, history, oration and negotiation which played a vital role in the burgeoning Federation movement until its culmination in 1900 when the Constitution was finally passed by the British Parliament. The Australian representatives were greatly pleased that they had been able to get the act passed with so little amendment.

It was during Deakin's struggle to achieve independence for a united Australia that he received his next great geist influence in the form of the mentoring by the English born intellectual, headmaster, journalist, politician and educational reformer, Charles Pearson. Even before the rise to stardom of Henry George, Pearson had been lecturing wisely on the history of taxation in England. Allying himself with The Age and the more radical Liberals, he advocated a progressive tax on the unearned increment accruing to large landowners, a tax which should effectively limit the size of estates to 40,000



Edmund Barton & Alfred Deakin in the 1901 Cabinet

acres (16,200 ha) and thereby meet the chronic deficit in the colony of Victoria's budget caused by the drying up of revenue from the sale of crown land. He believed in free trade 'as he believed in the rules of arithmetic' and thought it 'infinitely more important that the land tax should be put on a sound basis than that a few duties in the tariff should be struck off or diminished'.

Pearson was a personal mentor to Deakin, who was later to describe Pearson as 'a leading figure in one of the fiercest campaigns of party warfare waged within the Empire in this century'. Pearson's organisation, the National Reform and Protection League, was regarded by the big pastoralists, bankers and merchants as the most serious challenge to their economic and political power since the granting of responsible government. The high-born Pearson appeared to some as a class traitor: Melbourne Punch referred to 'Professor Pearson's alliance with the Communists'.

Before we turn to Deakin's second great life mission, we should examine his fascinating personal life and interests which today would be seen as far to unorthodox and risky for a public figure. But let's get one thing straight from the start – Deakin was not a nobleman but very much a noble man. He was a dedicated family man to his beloved wife and three daughters and was inspired by what he saw as the highest principles. He was a good provider to his family, who all lived in their South Yarra house from where Deakin walked, bicycled or took the tram to the city. Have there been any other prime ministers who copped a summons for riding on the footpath? And it's worth repeating that he was almost universally liked, admired and respected by his contemporaries, who called him "Affable Alfred".

Yet he was certainly a complex character – the outer man generally charming, confident and intelligent yet the inner man often wracked with doubt about himself and his place in the world. All his life he was given to deep introspection and prayer. The young Deakin was attracted to spiritualism and theosophy wanted to be a philosopher, poet, dramatist: instead he "merely" became a statesman. He was unusually modest and circumspect, declining all British offers of titles and distinctions in the belief that he had not earned them and that his independence might be compromised.

In contrast to the current American crop of politicians who proclaim their piety, Deakin invariably took pains to obscure the spiritual dimensions of his character from public gaze. Only in his private writings is it evident that he felt a strong sense of providence and destiny working in his career – indeed, the way his remarkable life played out it seems that these feelings were right on the money. But rather than having an inflated sense of his gift to the nation, Deakin's sincere longing for spiritual fulfillment led him to express a sense of unworthiness in his private diaries which mingled with his

literary aspirations as a poet. These diaries express a profound contemplative (though more ecumenical) Christian view of the importance of humility in seeking divine assistance with his career. "A life, the life of Christ," Deakin wrote, "that is the one thing needful — the only revelation required is there ... We have but to live it." In 1888, as an example relevant to his work for Federation, Deakin prayed: "Oh God, grant me that judgment & foresight which will enable me to serve my country — guide me and strengthen me, so that I may follow & persuade others to follow the path which shall lead to the elevation of national life & thought & permanence of well earned prosperity — give me light & truth & influence for the highest & the highest only." Mighty stuff, eh?

Perhaps Australia's greatest historian, Manning Clark, whose History of Australia cites extensively from his studies of Deakin's private wrote: "By reading the world's scriptures and mystics a deep peace had settled far inside [Deakin]: now he felt a 'serenity at the core of my heart'. He wanted to know whether participation in the world's affairs would disturb that serenity ... he was tormented by the thought that the emptiness of the man within corresponded with the emptiness of society at large where Mammon had found a new demesne to infest."

And so to the final chapter of this man's worldly life. Edmund Barton became Australia's first Prime Minister and Deakin became the first Attorney General and Leader of the House. Deakin was to become Australia's second Prime Minister and he served in this role for three terms (1903-4, 1905-8 and 1909-10). He resigned from his first term as PM when he refused to accede to Labour party demands, but in 1905, after Labour had made electoral gains, he formed a new Liberal ministry and stayed in office with Labour support until 1908. During this period, curbs on alien immigration were eased somewhat, pensions provided for the aged, and important commercial laws adopted. After a commission (set up in 1906) proposed that only factories paying "fair and reasonable" wages should be given the benefit of tariff protection, Deakin affirmed his New Protection doctrine of a benefit to the worker from tariffs; in 1907 a minimum, or "basic," wage was established.

Deakin lost support in 1908 but became prime minister for a third term (1909-1910) in a "fusion" with erstwhile opponents on the non-Labour side. A significant defense measure was the creation of an Australian naval squadron. When Labour (under Andrew Fisher) replaced Deakin, many liberal measures advocated earlier by him were adopted. Deakin remained in the House of Representatives until 1913 when he resigned prior to that year's elections.

It is only possible to here summarise Deakin's other achievements as prime minister. He was largely responsible for building the basic national government structure by recognising the need for, and fighting to establish, institutions such

as the High Court, the Public Service and the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration. Legislation relating to immigration, trade protection, defence and labour were framed by his Government, which gained an international reputation for experiments in welfare policies and reforms in working conditions. It's worth noting that in his second term as PM, Deakin took measures to establish the future national capital, which was to be set up as a geoist enclave with its land tenure founded on the site rent collected as the basis of government revenue. It should be said that the idea of public financing through site rental was extremely popular in the early days of Australia, supported by both Deakin's Liberal Party and his Labor opponent Andrew Fisher.

As prime minister, Deakin's efforts to introduce powerful geoist reforms were delayed and diluted by the politics of the day, which involved many coalitions and compromises. Constitutionally, much more power then lay with the states than the commonwealth - in fact, it wasn't until 1942 that the federal government took over the income tax powers from the states. Deakin's Victoria had already introduced a land tax act in 1877 and Deakin believed more in state's rights than federal power. The irony is that it wasn't until shortly after Deakin's resignation in 1910 when Labor's Andrew Fisher came to power that a federal land tax was introduced, initially to finance federal pensions.

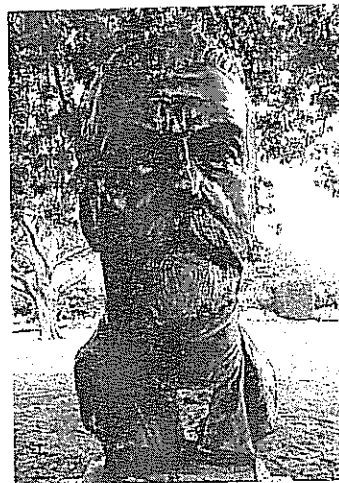
What else? In his second term Deakin authorized the survey of a trans-continental railway-route, and provided for Australian statistics, meteorology, wireless telegraphy and copyright. The Contract Immigrants Act of 1905 established stringent procedures and safeguards for admitting contract labour, and the Commonwealth assumed full control of the former British New Guinea. The Commonwealth Literary Fund came into being and Australia involved itself in Antarctica. The Surplus Revenue Act of 1908 set the Commonwealth on the path to financial independence and dominance. Old-age pensions were introduced. Fittingly for a geoist, Deakin created the term "Commonwealth of Australia" as he saw Australians sharing a Common Wealth.

And with Deakin's resignation from politics we must sadly turn to the tragic finale of Deakin's life, for to tell the story of how a life filled with immense achievements and the highest ideals prematurely fades into dementia is tough work. One can speculate whether Deakin's deep sense of destiny and yearning for mystical oneness gave him a glimpse of the bitter chalice that would be passed to him in his twilight years.

It was actually during his second term as Prime Minister that he received the first indications of the toll his hard work and responsibilities were taking on his health. His memory began to fail him and he wrote of his concern regarding this in his private journals. When Deakin retired from Parliamentary life in January 1913 his health was broken

and his once magnificent memory virtually non-existent. Tragically, he was fully aware of his decline; his retirement was meant to be full of books and writing, but he was now unable to remember things that he had read the previous day. Despite this, he was persuaded to chair a Royal Commission on Food Supply in 1914 and to act as president of the Australian Commission at the International Exposition in San Francisco in 1915. He battled on and accepted the work but found both tasks extremely onerous and his mental state worsened such that he was seldom in the public light again. The loving support of his wife, family and friends provided him with a great deal of comfort and eased his life as much as was possible until his death in October 1919, at the age of 63. His progressive mental collapse was probably due to Alzheimer's disease.

Deakin was a great geoist, a great Australian, perhaps the first great Australian and arguably the greatest Australian. He began as a dreamer, he was always an idealist, yet he realized that he lived in a world of men with important worldly concerns, and so his life became one which was to glitter with achievements in the service of his newborn nation. Australians to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth. They don't make 'em like Alfred Deakin anymore, that's for sure.



A bronze bust of Alfred Deakin in Ballarat

Next issue: Who's the next geoist in history? Hands on the buzzer! I was a co-founder of the London School of Economics. I wrote numerous brochures and speeches for the Fabian Society. I am still the only person to have been awarded both a Nobel Prize for Literature and an Oscar. I became a vegetarian and anti-vivisectionist at age 25. Besides being an outspoken geoist, I was an accomplished orator in the furtherance of equal rights for women, alleviating abuses of the working class, and promoting healthy lifestyles. I was active in local politics and served on the London County Council. I'm probably most famous as a playwright (I wrote over 60 plays), journalist and dramatist. I was born in Dublin. Give up? - then read all about George Bernard Shaw in the next pulsating edition of Progress.