

Alfred Deakin

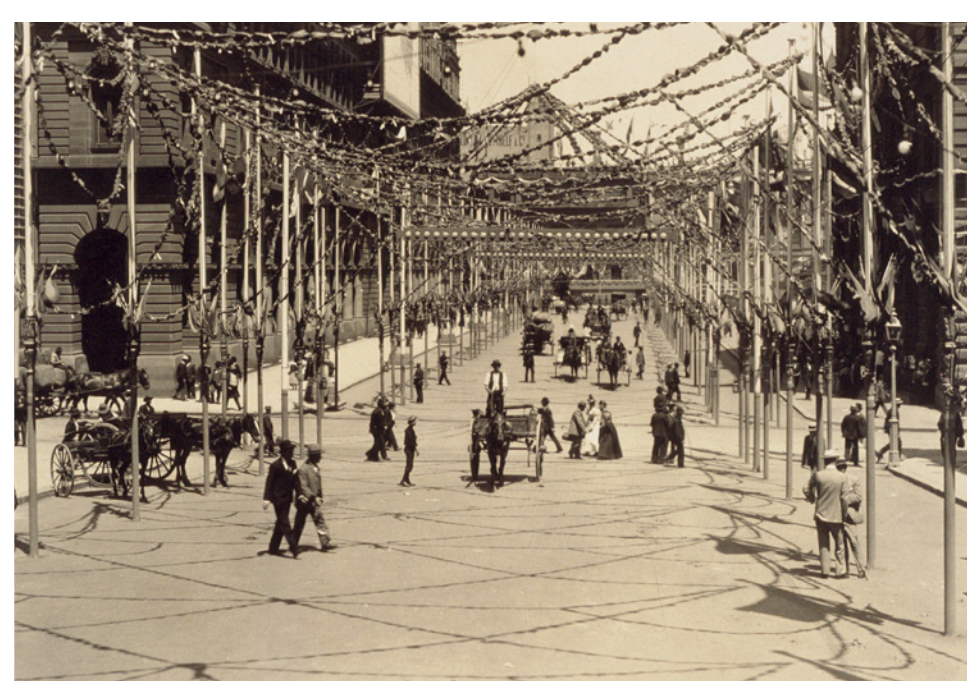
(1856–1919)

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



A founder of nation

After a second referendum, the Commonwealth Bill was finally passed in 1899. The following year attention turned to London when an Australian delegation, including Deakin and Barton, was invited to oversee the historic passage of the *Draft Bill to Constitute the Commonwealth of Australia* through the Imperial Parliament.

Disagreement with the formidable Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, occurred over Clause 74 (appeals to the Privy Council) but, after protracted negotiation, a satisfactory compromise was reached. Alone in a room after the conclusion of the last meeting with British authorities, the Australians grabbed each other's hands and danced in jubilation. Nationhood had been many years in the making, and the number of obstacles that had to be overcome prompted Deakin to note that Federation's 'actual accomplishment must always appear to have been secured by a series of miracles'. He had played his part, one he firmly believed had been sanctified by mystic, invisible forces.

The Commonwealth's first Government under Barton bore all the marks of Deakin's handiwork. Indeed, Barton's policy speech in January 1901 contained so many of Deakin's ideas that some observers thought he had written it. Deakin accepted the portfolio of Attorney-General in the new ministry, in the next three years introducing a series of long, complex statutes which set such 'a high standard in legal draftsmanship', according to recent Chief Justice Anthony Mason, that their 'present form basically remains as it was when first enacted'.

It was only a matter of time until Deakin succeeded Barton and, in September 1903, he became Australia's second Prime Minister. Over the next seven years, and on the three separate occasions that he occupied the country's highest office, only once, briefly, did he enjoy a parliamentary majority. His skills as a negotiator were constantly tested, a valid measure of the sheer scale of his achievements in office, especially during his second prime ministership (July 1905 to November 1908).

Biographer Murdoch has commented that, during those central years, Deakin was 'at his happiest, his freest, his most masterful', and it is hard to disagree on the basis of a record that boasted the establishment of old-age pensions, a protectionist tariff, the (then almost universally endorsed) *Immigration Restriction Act*, a High Court, a Court of Conciliation and Arbitration, New Protection measures that linked economic progress to wage fairness, and a robust trade agreement with Britain. Policies were shaped to put Australian defence in Australian hands, the trans-continental railway was surveyed, a national capital site chosen, the Commonwealth Literary Fund begun and provisions made for Australian meteorology, wireless telegraphy, copyright and statistics.

The quality of the infant Commonwealth's egalitarian initiatives attracted global attention, social scientists from Europe and America travelling to Australia to observe at first-hand the 'social laboratory' of the world.

In 1907, at the height of his authority as national leader, Deakin attended the Imperial Conference in London with his wife Pattie. He lobbied hard though unsuccessfully for an Imperial Federation to solidify a British Empire where self-governing dominions would have a say on issues of defence, foreign policy and economic co-operation, but was firmly rebuffed. During the conference, Deakin for the first time noticed some worrying memory loss. He told no-one and, in the years that followed, he suffered through the onset of what seems to have been Alzheimer's disease, even as he continued to be Prime Minister and, after, to accept an assortment of public positions up to 1915.



Sources

Portrait of Alfred Deakin seated at his desk, National Library of Australia, file id: 136656646 • Charles Nutall (1872-1934) *The Duke of Cornwall and York opening the First Commonwealth Parliament of Australia*, May 9th 1901, 1902, Gifts Collection, Parliament House Art Collection, Department of Parliamentary Services, Canberra, ACT
Unknown artist (n.d.) *Street decorations for Federation celebrations* (Martin Place, Sydney), 1900-1901, Historic Memorials Collection, Department of Parliamentary Services, Canberra, ACT • Alfred and Pattie Deakin, 1907, National Library of Australia, Album 382 • House of Representatives Assembly Chamber, © Copyright Parliament of Victoria
Tom Roberts (1856-1931) *Opening of the First Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia by H.R.H. The Duke of Cornwall and York* (Later King George V), May 9, 1901, 1903, On permanent loan to the Parliament of Australia from the British Royal Collection, Image courtesy of the Parliament House Art Collection, Canberra, ACT and the Royal Collection Trust. © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2016
Her Majesty's Stationery Office, *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act, 1900: Original Public Record Copy* (detail), Gifted by the House of Commons, United Kingdom to the Australian Government and People. Gifts Collection, Parliament House Art Collection, Department of Parliamentary Services, Canberra, ACT