Deakin commemoration – Parliament of Australia

On the afternoon of 7 October 1919, Prime Minister Billy Hughes announced in the Federal Parliament the death of Alfred Deakin that morning, describing him as ‘a man whose name has entwined itself about our history. He was one of the makers of Australia’. After a stint as a barrister and a longer period as a journalist with the Melbourne Age, Deakin served for over thirty years in both the Victorian and Federal Parliaments, including three terms as Prime Minister across the first decade after Federation. (Notably, his first speech in the Victorian Parliament in 1879 was also the setting of his principled resignation due to concerns expressed over the election).

After Hughes’ announcement of Deakin’s death, and following brief statements by Frank Tudor (Leader of the Opposition), Sir Joseph Cook (Minister for the Navy) and Sir Robert Best (who had served in both the Victorian and Federal Parliament with Deakin for over 20 years), the House adjourned as a mark of respect. This was the second time that Parliament had so adjourned to honour a former Prime Minister, following the death of George Reid just over a year prior.

Two days later the Federal Parliament hosted Deakin’s state funeral, held in the Queen’s Hall at the Victorian Parliament House. The Treasurer William Watt provided the eulogy and contended:

there seems to be something singularly appropriate in the fact that the service is held in this hall. It was in this building where Alfred Deakin’s greatest efforts were made and his
greatest achievements registered. It was through yonder portal that forty years ago, as a brilliant young man of 23, carrying the esteem and plaudits of a large and influential constituency, he entered to do service for his country.

Deakin was a dominant figure in federal politics over the first decade of the Commonwealth. As Attorney-General under inaugural Prime Minister Edmund Barton he successfully guided the controversial Judiciary Act 1903 establishing the High Court of Australia. Under his own prime ministership his governments were active in a varied range of policy areas including Australian naval capacity, protectionist measures, a federal-state financial agreement, and the administration of Papua New Guinea and the status of the New Hebrides. Deakin was a forceful presence at the 1907 Imperial Conference.

The first biography of Deakin’s life was published in the first few years following his death in 1923, authored by his literary friend Walter Murdoch upon the commission of Deakin’s wife Pattie. In it Murdoch praised Deakin as a ‘rare master of words’ but further noted that ‘we must not forget that words were but his instrument, and that in the long run he will be judged, not by the skill with which he used that instrument, but by the greatness of what he achieved by means of it’. Most recent was Judith Brett’s biography, The Enigmatic Mr Deakin, which won the State Library of NSW National Biography Award in 2018 and was the subject of her Parliamentary Library Lecture held in October 2017.

Deakin, along with other drafters of the Constitution Edmund Barton, George Reid and John Forrest were all put forward to the Parliament in 1922 to have federal electorates posthumously named after them. The then Attorney-General Littleton Groom declared of Deakin that ‘if any man ever deserved the thanks of not merely this State [of Victoria], but the whole Commonwealth, it is the honoured statesman whose name is incorporated in this motion’. However, some non-Government members criticised the representational impact of the Victorian Distribution Commissioner’s report leading to a halt to any changes, including the less controversial re-naming of electorates. After another attempt to name an electorate after Deakin was similarly prevented in 1934, the Parliament eventually succeeded in establishing the electorate of Deakin in time for the 1937 election.

It is also noteworthy that the earliest commemoration of Alfred Deakin occurred while he was alive, and even before his prominent role in Australia’s Federation. As President of the Victorian Royal Commission on Water Supply and subsequently the Victorian Government’s Commissioner for Water Supply between 1886 and 1890, Deakin was instrumental in the expansion of regional Victoria as a leading advocate of agricultural irrigation advancement. In moving the Water Supply and Irrigation Bill in Victoria’s Parliament on 24 June 1886, Deakin declared:

in the future when this colony forms part, as I hope it will, of a federated Australia that will be renowned, I trust, all round the world for the richness of its soil, the enterprise of its people, and the freedom of its government, I believe that in those days this small Victoria will be in many senses a greater garden that it is now (p. 447).

The city of Mildura, first established as an ‘irrigation colony’ was a prominent example of this expansion, and accordingly its main thoroughfare Deakin Avenue was named in his honour.

To commemorate the 100th anniversary of Alfred Deakin’s death, Parliament House is hosting the Alfred Deakin: Creating a Nation Exhibition from 7 October 2019 to 2 February 2020; and the Parliamentary Library will issue the first volume of Deakin’s collected letters to the London Morning Post newspaper. On 14 October, Dr Dave Headon of the Australian National University will present a commemorative lecture ‘Puzzles of a Prime Minister: Alfred Deakin revealed’ in the Main Committee Room at Parliament House.