Why politics?—ambition and ideals in Alfred Deakin’s shifting political vocation

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Thank you for inviting me to talk to you again about the remarkable life of Alfred Deakin, which ended 100 years ago last month. Last time I focussed on Deakin’s political achievements and the way he handled the challenges of minority government. Today I will take a more strictly biographical approach—and ask why Deakin spent his life in politics.

The core challenge of political biography is to answer the question, why politics? What inner needs did it fulfil? What emotional and psychological resources were mustered for its accomplishment? How did the motivation and commitments change across the life course?

Deakin’s was a political life, but it was not one he consciously set out for when a young man. After he became a politician, he wondered often if he should have chosen a different path and he repeatedly flirted with the possibility of resigning and leaving politics altogether. But he never did.

The answer to the question ‘why politics?’ shifts across Deakin’s life time, from the accidental taking up of politics at the end of the 1870s when he was in his early twenties, to his devotion to federation during the 1890s, to his sense of duty to the early Commonwealth, first as the first Attorney-General and then three times as Prime Minister. By 1910 when he led the newly fused Liberal Party to defeat at the hands of Andrew Fisher and Labor, political office had become a burdensome responsibility. He stayed on after the defeat for another three years as leader of the Opposition, knowing that his powers were fading as he succumbed to early onset dementia. He was not yet 60 when he retired in 1913, to be succeeded as Liberal leader by Joseph Cook.

As I just said, Deakin did not consciously set his sights on a political career. He was born in Melbourne in 1856 to gold rush immigrants. He attended Melbourne Grammar and later studied law as an evening student at the University. But law did not interest him much. His passions were literature and philosophy, including theology and comparative religion. On leaving school he contemplated various futures for himself: as a preacher, an actor, a dramatist, an essayist. Pursuing the latter he approached David Syme, the powerful editor of The Age, hoping to write literary essays. Instead he found himself covering parliament.

Deakin was a good looking, talkative young man, and he and the much older Syme got on well. When, in 1879, a local Liberal electoral committee asked Syme to recommend a candidate for a by-election he suggested Deakin. The Liberals did not expect to win, but they wanted to field a candidate. Thus, Deakin wrote twenty years later, ‘at the age of twenty two I was suddenly whirled into politics.’

Whirled into politics. The phrase captures the head-long rush of events that followed Deakin’s rather impulsive decision to contest the by-election. He became a candidate on Friday, addressed his first campaign meeting the following night, and then was off on the campaign trail. To his and everyone else’s amazement Deakin won the seat. Because of some minor electoral irregularities he resigned, and fought three more election campaigns before settling into his parliamentary seat.

The phrase ‘whirled into politics’ though is more than just a description of the hectic activity of Deakin’s first days in politics. Whirling is an image of motion and energy, worldly, natural, cosmic and spiritual. With it Deakin aligned his entry into public life with larger forces. At the time he entered politics Deakin had been an active spiritualist for about four years. Spiritualism was one response to the crisis of orthodox religious belief in the middle of the nineteenth century. It rejected dogma and sectarian
denominational differences for a universal religious faith in a spiritually meaningful universe and it retained Christianity’s belief in an after-life. Its distinctive conviction was the belief that the spirits of the departed could communicate from beyond the grave and that this was provable by scientific methods. Young Deakin was a member of a prestigious séance circle and a successful medium. He wrote a book, *The New Pilgrim’s Progress*, dictated by the shade of John Bunyan, and was active in the Victorian Association of Progressive Spiritualists. He was convinced that events in both his personal and political life fulfilled a series of prophecies, including that he would marry fellow spiritualist, Pattie Browne, and that he would soon be back in parliament.

In his early days as a member of parliament Deakin regularly sought guidance from the spirits through a suburban medium. The shades of John Knox, Thomas Macaulay, John Bunyan and John Stuart Mill all appeared and all were keen to help him become a great reformer. Deakin recorded their advice in a diary, which survived his regular culling of his papers. The spirits urge him not to yield to depression; they advise him on reading and on his health. One reassured him that in a forthcoming speech, ‘[a] grand spirit—will lend my words weight—so that I shall convince and conquer in spite of opposition—shall be great Reformer’. The diary returns again and again to the question of Deakin’s life’s purpose. He will be a great reformer—but whether in law, politics or the work of the spirit was not yet clear.

Putting to one side the bizarreness of his beliefs in spirits, we can ask, what psychological role did these regular séances play for Deakin? The answer, I think, is that they reassured him and gave him confidence. And they fed his conviction that he was special, singled out by destiny for great work. The political world he entered in 1879 was small and intense as democrats and conservative fought over the powers of the upper house to block progressive legislation. Finding himself in it by chance, Deakin felt himself to be a player in world history, an agent of progressive reform engaged in a life and death struggle with the obstructionists for the colony’s future. Had Victorian politics in the early 1880s been calm and procedural, it is unlikely to have held him for long.

But more than the belief that one is special is needed to succeed in politics. One also needs skills and aptitude. In his early political campaigns Deakin revealed his extraordinary gift for oratory. In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, political oratory was at its height in the English-speaking world and Deakin was brilliant at it. His oratorical powers drew in part on his phenomenal memory and in part on the internalisation of the rhythms of English from his wide reading, particularly of poetry and verse drama. Words, phrases, images, arguments, quotations, examples streamed from his mouth with great rapidity in complex, well-shaped sentences. On the platform or on his feet in parliament, mind and body working in unison, senses alert to the audience response, Deakin was fully alive and present in the moment. It was an exhilarating experience.

Twenty years after he began his political career, Deakin himself answered the question ‘why politics?’ in a short book on his very early political career. He judged his younger self to have had insufficient talent or originality for the theatre, for poetry or for literary prose and these were unlikely to return the yearly income of three to five hundred pounds to which he aspired. His attempt to become a preacher and replace the retiring first minister of Melbourne’s Unitarian church, Martha Turner, had been rebuffed. He had rejected commercial employment because it was directly involved with making money, which seemed unworthy of a free man; teaching was drudgery; journalism was too concerned with the transient and superficial. He does not even mention the law for which he had qualified, and concludes that he became a politician ‘by sheer force of circumstance rather than by independent choice’.

Deakin is remembering here his youthful reluctance to knuckle down, to put on the yoke of adult responsibility and routine, but he is also revealing his need for variety and action, for work which will pick him up and carry him along, in which his own excitable, restless energies could be aligned with the movements of the cosmos. Politics was not just the one door still open. It held deep attractions for him, far deeper than he ever admitted or perhaps even realised.

Politics provided the young Deakin with drama, excitement, and a great deal of attention from important older men. And with his political successes apparently prophesied, it satisfied his yearning for work that served a higher purpose. As his life in politics unfolded, he did have periods of doubt; and he soon learned that public life had its fair share of tedium and repetition. But by then he was too deeply in to leave easily.
Part Two

During the next decade Deakin’s political fortunes rose with those of the city of his birth. The colony of Victoria was riding a wave of prosperity and Marvellous Melbourne was in full swing. He was soon in the Ministry, and by 1885 he was the leader of the Liberal Party and Chief Secretary in a coalition government. He visited California to explore irrigation and invited the Chaffey brothers to establish an irrigation colony on the Murray. In 1887 he visited London for the first time, as a member of the Victorian delegation to the Imperial Conference. This trip too he believed had been prophesied. In London he boldly challenged the British Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, over Britain’s reluctance to annex the New Hebrides, and he refused a knighthood. It was a thrilling series of triumphs, and he returned from it a local celebrity, especially among the young native-born men of the Australian Natives Association (ANA) who saw him as representing the future of young Australia as a proud federated nation. The spirit of the emerging nation seemed embodied in this brilliant native-born man with his upright and independent public persona. The bush legend was still in the making: the sun-bronzed, laconic, unruly outback shearsers and drovers had not yet captured Australia’s imagination. Deakin was the harbinger of a different Australia that was metropolitan, urbane and sophisticated and he could hold his own on the world stage.

In 1888, as the Australian colonies celebrated the centenary of the arrival of the first fleet, cracks were starting to appear in their prosperity, especially in Victoria where a speculative land and housing boom was in full swing and government debt was mounting as it borrowed to build the infrastructure to support the growing population. The Gillies-Deakin government was defeated at an election at the end of 1890, and the following year the boom came to a shuddering end. Soon banks and building societies were closing their doors, bankruptcies and unemployment were soaring, and people were leaving Victoria. Deakin had been persuaded onto the boards of some of these building societies and so felt implicated in their failures and the loss of depositors’ savings, including his own and his father’s. Deakin’s sins were undue optimism rather than fraud and chicanery, as with some of his parliamentary colleagues, and the crisis shook his faith in the inevitability of progress.

The late 1880s, when Deakin’s colonial career was at its peak, were the last, dying days of Australia Felix and the gold rush immigrants’ dreams of a prosperous society free from the entrenched class differences and constrained opportunities of the Britain they had left. And it was the mid-point in Deakin’s life, when a man realizes he has stopped growing up and started to grow old. Opportunities remain for achievement and success, but the limitless horizons of a fortunate youth are gone, and with them youth’s reckless energies. As the colony’s prosperity plummeted over the next few years, so did Deakin’s spirits and his conviction that politics was his destiny.

In 1884 Deakin had started a prayer diary, which he maintained on and off until he finally left parliament in 1913. Written late at night and early morning, the prayers are of two main types: ‘Thank you for my many blessings’, when things are going well, and ‘Oh Lord, show me the way’, when they are not.

In the early 1890s things were definitely not going well and he prayed:

O God, once more the waters have gone over me, I am drowned ... Strip my lethargy, scorch my wavering faith so that I may accept my part and perform it without the endless questioning and weary round of iterated unrealities. Make me real.¹

But what was his part? Friends and colleagues were urging him to return to the leadership to help calm the panic that was turning the financial crisis into a disaster. He told his supporters he was staying out of office until he could be sure he could realise his Liberal principles but his prayers tell a different and more psychologically interesting story. In 1892 he confessed to his God:

I even dread the influence I seem to possess because uncertain of it being exercised for good and still more dread to increase my responsibilities, blind as I am how should I lead the blind.²

¹ Prayers, 9 August 1891, 14 August 1891, 4 November 1891, 20 September 91, 2 November 1891.
² Prayer CLXXIX, 11 December 1892.
Deakin did not take the leadership at this time because he did not have a clue as to what could be done to restore the colony to financial and economic health. Deakin was a facilitator of the spirit of progress when times were good, but he was not the man for a crisis. The spirit had proven a poor guide to both public and personal finances and, like most other Victorians, he saw the crisis as well-deserved punishment for greed and indulgence. He stayed on the back bench and returned to the law to rebuild his finances, but he did not leave politics.

Why not? And so we come to his second answer to the question ‘why politics?’ The answer was the promise of federation and for the rest of the 1890s this promise held him in political life.

Australia’s six colonies had been talking seriously about federating since the early 1880s and Victorians were especially keen but the process was going nowhere, swept aside by the political crisis. In 1893 a people’s conference in Corowa revived the cause and came up with a plan. Voters in each colony would elect representatives to a convention, which would determine a Federal Constitution Bill, which would then be submitted to referenda in every colony. Federationists could now move beyond talk to start mobilising support for the forthcoming popular votes. To Deakin it seemed that providence had shown him the path ahead, that his political energies could again be aligned with the forward movement of the cosmos, in this case towards the birth of a new nation.

For the rest of the 1890s the achievement of federation became the focus of his political energies. He was instrumental in forming a federation league in Victoria, and he gave countless speeches on the necessity of federation, many of them to branches of the ANA which had taken it up as their special cause. In 1896 he was elected as one of Victoria’s representatives to the second constitutional convention which met in Adelaide.

While there Deakin prayed:

Subordinate the personal, the selfish, the aggressive, the obstinate in us that we may fulfil thy larger purpose. For myself O God obliterate me thoroughly, shut myself and my interests from my sight, or consciousness, in my surrender to Thy will as thine instrument.\(^3\)

Deakin went to the Convention not as a representative of Victorian interests, nor even as a liberal advocate, but as a facilitator of destiny—and the destiny was the birth of the Australian nation.

In March 1898, on the eve of the first series of referenda on the new Constitution, prospects of success were not looking good. Neither the premiers of NSW or Victoria had yet endorsed the Bill. The Age looked set to oppose it on democratic grounds and Syme was pressuring Deakin to do the same. Instead Deakin made a speech which turned the tide. Delivered without notes to the ANA banquet at the Shamrock Hotel in Bendigo, this is the supreme oratorical feat of Deakin’s life as he told the men of the ANA that their ‘hour has come’:

“These are the times that try men’s souls.” ... Let us nail our standard to the mast. Let us stand shoulder to shoulder in defence of the enlightened liberalism of the constitution. ... The contest in which you are about to engage is one in which it is a privilege to be enrolled. It lifts your labours to the loftiest political levels, where they may be inspired with the purest patriotic passion for national life and being.

The coincidence of the birth of the new Australian Commonwealth with the start of a new century can invest federation with retrospective inevitability. But this is not how it looked to Deakin as federation’s fortunes ebbed and flowed on the ‘cross currents of provincialism’. When it was all over and the Australian Constitution an Act of the British Parliament, he reflected that ‘if ever anything ought to be styled providential, it is the extraordinary combination of circumstances, persons and most intricate interrelations’ which led to the Commonwealth. To those who followed the fortunes of federation ‘as if their own, and lived the life of devotion to it day by day, its actual accomplishment must always appear to have been secured by a series of miracles.’\(^4\)

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\(^3\) Prayer CCXIV, 4 April 1897.

\(^4\) Federal Story, 173.
The Commonwealth

With federation achieved, Deakin became Attorney-General in the first Commonwealth Government, and after Edmund Barton retired to the High Court, its second Prime Minister. He was 47 when he became Prime Minister for the first time. So we come to his third answer to the question ‘why politics?’: a sense of duty and service. When the Constitution was finally law and the Commonwealth inaugurated, Deakin saw it as the duty of those who had argued for federation to make it work, a compact between the people who had voted ‘Yes’ and their elected representatives.

The Constitution provided a framework for the government of the nation—but that was all—it was only a framework. Federal institutions had to be built and federal laws passed for areas of federal responsibility. Support for the federal union slumped in the early years, once voters confronted the expense and the states realised how much they had given up. There was, for example, fierce resistance to the establishment of the High Court because of the expense entailed. Deakin fought hard for the Court, arguing that its establishment was ‘a direction from the people from whom the constitution came.’

There was a real danger that if these early Commonwealth governments failed the new federation itself would fail, foundering on partisan differences, parochial jealousies and personal animosities. Federal sentiment and a wide federal perspective had to be nurtured. Again and again in his speeches after federation, Deakin conjured up the map of Australia, reminding his audience that they were no longer just Victorians or South Australians or Tasmanians, they were now also Australians. This was Deakin’s great mission in the federal parliament—to make real the promise of a nation carried in the Constitution. But it was not easy and he was often downhearted.

Until 1910 no party had a majority in the House of Representatives. There were seven changes of Prime Minister after Edmund Barton was sworn in as the first Prime Minister, and only the last of these was the result of the government losing an election—in 1910 when Labor, led by Andrew Fisher, won an absolute majority and a clean sweep in the Senate. The main cause of this instability was growing electoral support for the Labor Party which turned the two-sided conflict between a ministry and opposition into a three-cornered contest in which no party could attain a clear majority.

The rise of Labor was unsettling for Deakin’s belief in the coincidence between his liberal political beliefs and the spirit of progress. Deakin shared many of Labor’s aims to improve the lives of working class people, and he saw the conservatives as enemies of progress. But he baulked at Labor’s demands for members to give up their independence of judgement in the pledge, and he was critical of the scope of their ambitions for government control of the economy.

Mid-way through the Commonwealth’s first decade, Deakin almost left political life again. When the conservative George Reid became Prime Minister in 1904, Deakin retired again to the back bench and seriously explored becoming a preacher. In the end he concluded that his open-ended approach to religious faith made him unsuitable for the preacher’s vocation. He returned to his political last and was soon Prime Minister again. This was in 1905. Deakin governed for the next three years with the support of the Labor Party. This alliance laid the foundations for what we now know as the Australian Settlement in which manufacturers got tariff protection in return for higher wages for their workers. When Labor withdrew its support at the end of 1908, Deakin reluctantly accepted the inevitability of a fusion between his Liberal Protectionists and the NSW-based conservatives.

The title for my biography, The Enigmatic Mr Deakin, comes from something Deakin wrote about himself at this time. Since 1900 Deakin had been writing an anonymous letter for the London daily newspaper, the Morning Post, signing himself ‘the Australian Correspondent’, and he continued them until 1913. It was not uncommon for politicians to write anonymously for the press, but it was uncommon for Prime Ministers to do so, commenting on their own actions, and wondering about their own motivations, in Deakin’s case even interviewing himself. In 1909, as negotiations with Joseph Cook were proceeding over the fusing of the two non-Labor parties, he wrote:

For reasons known only to himself, which are a perpetual subject of controversy in our press, Mr Deakin pursues his enigmatic methods of action ... in spite of his persistent elusiveness the pressure brought to bear upon him ... appears so strong that some unexpected development must be near at hand.
Notice here how Deakin makes himself the centre of the action. When he wrote it, did he know what he would do? Deakin’s political enemies saw him as opportunistic, cunning and inconstant. After the Fusion, when Deakin had abandoned Labor and thrown in his lot with his erstwhile bitter enemies, Billy Hughes attacked him in the parliament for his inconstancy:

> What a career his has been! In his hands, at various times, have rested the banners of every party in this country. He has proclaimed them all, he has held them all, he has betrayed them all.\(^5\)

Hughes turned Deakin’s enigmatic passivity into the cunning, self-justifying steering by the chances for power that would mark his own future political career, but even so he recognised a recurring pattern. Hughes was right. Deakin did see himself as an agent of Providence, it is just that often he was often not at all sure where Providence was heading. ‘Oh Lord show me the way.’ In the Commonwealth parliament, he no longer sought occult help with séances and divinations. Instead he would step back, let events unfold and wait for Providence to show its hand.

Fusion ushered in Deakin’s final term as Prime Minister. An election was due in 1910 and Deakin hoped that the new united non-Labor party would sweep the polls. He was wrong. Labor won a decisive victory to become the first Commonwealth government with a clear parliamentary majority. At a personal level, though, Deakin was relieved. Since 1907 Deakin had been complaining about failures of memory, insomnia had become chronic, and he had periods of what was then described as nervous exhaustion. Politics was taking an increasing psychological toll. In 1910 he wrote to his sister Catherine:

> A continent was strapped to my shoulders … I had come to a dreadful state of mind ever vibrating in different keys, always planning always apprehensive and always being switched on and off suddenly to a variety of calls that robbed me of everything that makes the inner life steadfast and enduring.

Deakin stayed in parliament for another three years, leading a shell-shocked Opposition, and he fought a successful campaign against Labor’s referendum to give the Commonwealth power over trade and commerce, industrial relations, and monopolies and corporations. He stayed in politics because he did not want to let his colleagues and supporters down, but it was becoming a struggle. He was in the early stages of dementia, and his commitment to politics was fading along with his formidable intellectual capacities.

As his health deteriorated, Deakin lost all zest for public life, trudging on from a sense of duty and because there seemed no obvious successor. He retired at the beginning of 1913. Without the work habits and routines of a lifetime, his mental deterioration accelerated. For a time he watched and recorded the slipping away of his mind but by the time he died on 7 October 1919 he no longer knew who he was.

While he still could Deakin too tried to discern the patterns of his life. He believed that his resilience in public life arose from his reliance on ‘the unseen in a spirit of faith at time indistinguishable from fatalism … that whatever happens is the best under the circumstances’. Without some such belief ‘my worrying, anxious temper, always fretting lest I should fall short … or miss the one right moment to act or speak … would have made me incapable of doing even the little I have been able to accomplish,’ he wrote in 1910.\(^7\)

All his actions were done under the eyes of his loving God. This God could be let down and disappointed, but he was not a wrathful God and in his presence Deakin felt no fear. In his occasional low moments Deakin would reflect that without the belief in a divine purpose for the universe and without faith in the

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5 CPD, 27 May 1909, 132–3.
soul’s immortality, it would be easy to live selfishly and in the moment. Deakin did not presume to know what the divine purpose was, only to believe that it existed, and when the way through events was unclear he would wait for providence to show its hand. His faith gave him an imagined still point from which to view the small struggles and personal vanities of the political world and the detachment to contemplate the long view of Australia’s historic opportunities and strategic challenges. And it gave him the will to persist.