

**Judith Brett, 'The Enigmatic Mr Deakin', Chapter 22 (Melbourne, Text Publishing, 2018)**

**Chapter 22:**

**CELEBRATIONS AND BEGINNINGS**

THE NEW NATION and the new century began together on 1 January 1901. Deakin shared a carriage with Barton and Richard O'Connor in the grand procession of more than ten thousand dignitaries, floats, mounted imperial troops and contingents representing various trades along an eight-kilometre route from Sydney's Domain to Centennial Park. Crowds lined the streets and filled Centennial Park, including a thousand-voice choir to sing in the new nation, which was to be inaugurated in a white octagonal wedding cake of a pavilion in the middle of the park.

Here the queen's proclamation of the Commonwealth of Australia was to be read, and the governor-general and his ministers were to swear their oaths. The outdoor ceremony accommodated the crowds but it had drawbacks: few could hear the ceremonial words and it was very hot under the midday sun, with humidity high after overnight rain. For the imperial troops in their dress uniforms, it was a test of endurance.

The family had not joined Deakin for the occasion. In the pavilion he seemed 'palpably nervous' and 'clasped the Bible in a very trembling hand', but when he repeated the oath, 'his exquisitely modulated, clear and far-reaching voice was as music to the ears of all within ear shot.' Nervous excitement on the brink of public performance was characteristic for Deakin, but he was also alive to the significance of the occasion, shimmering with the fulfilment of divine purpose for both the new nation and himself as its humble instrument.

The only moving image we have of Deakin is from this day, walking down the steps from the pavilion as the nation's first attorney-general and looking briefly at the camera, his doffed top hat winking in the sun. As premier of the host state, Lyne had asked the Salvation Army's Limelight Studio, then the country's only production unit, to film the procession and the ceremony. With footage taken by five fixed cameras, it is Australia's first documentary: thirty-five minutes of grainy images of gun carriages, troops riding under ceremonial arches, crowds cheering, and the key actors moving jerkily in and out of the pavilion.

The glimpse of Deakin is frustratingly fleeting. He wore ordinary morning dress, as did Barton, though some others were in court dress and Lord Hopetoun was resplendent in the full Windsor uniform. The curling beard of Deakin's younger days was now clipped to a Van Dyke-style point. In the afternoon cabinet met for the first time, and later Deakin met with Frederick Holder, who was angry about being dropped from the ministry in favour of Kingston. Deakin was exhausted, and made only a brief appearance at the evening's celebratory banquet.

Deakin was forty-four when he moved from colonial to federal politics and into the full glare of national history. He was the most widely known of the new ministers after Barton. According to the contemporary historian Henry Gyles Turner, there was no man from whom more was expected:

The manufacturers looked to him as the great apostle of Protection... The Labor Party hailed him as the author of the first Factories Act, and felt sure that, with Deakin in power, a satisfactory wage would be the law of the land. And in the mother country his reputation was linked with that of Edmund Barton as representing all that was worth considering in Australian statesmanship.

But Deakin had been here before, as the bearer of others' high expectations, and he had failed to meet them. A 1901 pen portrait of him in the new Sydney-based Liberal quarterly review *United Australia* concludes that his achievements in Victorian politics had not come up to his lofty ideals, or to the expectations of his friends and admirers, and that he had left no enduring legislative monument, not even the Irrigation Act, which had failed: \_'the silver tongued orator of Australian federation [is] a more brilliant speaker than a constructive statesman.'\_

The federal parliament was to open in Melbourne—its first home—in May 1901. Until then Deakin was up and down to Sydney, with the sea or train journey to Queenscliff added on to the Melbourne leg until the family returned to town in early February, and a visit to his mother and sister in Adams Street as he passed through Melbourne. When in Melbourne he worked from the Attorney-General's Department's temporary office in the General Post Office Building, on the corner of Elizabeth and Bourke streets, 'receiving an endless stream of tiresome visitors, and dealing with a great mass of correspondence'. Like other ministers, he was besieged by people eager to work for the Commonwealth government.

Deakin was working on the judiciary, interstate commission and public-service bills, as well as on machinery bills for customs, the post office and defence. It was a punishing regime; and he was missing out on his summer holiday, with only Sundays to rest, stroll and breathe the sea air. He was now also writing his weekly letter for the Morning Post, marking every Tuesday in his diary with the initials MP and Roman numerals. In what was becoming a recurring consequence of his hard work, he was frequently unwell, with poor sleep and an upset stomach.

As they began to build the machinery of government, he and Barton also had to organise the Liberal Protectionists for the first federal election, to be held at the end of March. Early in the month Deakin opened his campaign in Ballarat before a large crowd, speaking for one and a half hours without notes. His main message was that voters needed to vote as Australians: 'The great bulk of people were suffering from the habit of looking at every question through parochial spectacles. What they wanted were Federal field glasses...to scan the horizons of the continent.'

This was to be a frequent exhortation during Deakin's federal career. To him the larger, more unified view was always superior, higher and more evolved, less selfish and closer to the divine purpose than the narrow and parochial. Rather hyperbolically, he claimed that the state parliaments could not be considered to have lost power and prestige: 'as they become knotted together in one great national organism, they will attain, even in themselves, a higher and more complex life than belonged to them as separate Parliamentary units.'

At the federation conventions Deakin had argued that the politics of the federation would not be determined by divisions between the smaller and larger states, but between those 'who consider they should march in agreement with the advanced political thought of their time, and their rivals who...desire to go more slowly'.<sup>10</sup> But it was clear that party relations in the federal parliament were to be far more complex than this, with two fractures already apparent which did not fit Deakin's simple model of more and less progressive.

The first was between New South Wales and Victoria, over duties and tariffs on imports. Federation had delivered free trade between the states, but trade policy in relation to other countries, including Britain, was still to be determined. Since they had run out of land to sell, all colonial governments had imposed customs duties to raise revenue, but Victoria had also used tariffs to protect its infant industries. The dividing issue was the

purpose and the rate of tariffs, not their existence, although many in New South Wales still regarded free trade as a core Liberal doctrine.

William McMillan, a keen federationist and soon to be the first member for the Sydney seat of Wentworth, objected to Deakin's Liberals appropriating the name Liberal while identifying themselves with a policy that struck a blow against the principles of human liberty. Why, asked McMillan, should free-traders be 'obliged to come before Mr Deakin's tribunal to prove their Liberal credentials'? Why should they be classed as Conservatives? McMillan was replying to Deakin's account of 'The Liberal Outlook', in the inaugural issue of *United Australia*, which was edited by McMillan's close friend Bruce Smith, another Sydney-based free-trader who was about to enter the federal parliament.

Deakin's piece shows the enduring emotional structure which underlay his construction of the differences between Liberals and Conservatives: 'Upon the Liberal Party there falls, as always, the task of presenting a positive constructive policy to the new constituencies... whenever provincial or personal interests are operative, whenever representatives are returned merely upon past local services or wherever a negative platform is accepted, Conservatism will find its allies.' It was the conflict between the particular and the more universal, between the everlasting Nay and the everlasting Yea, between those who obstructed and those who facilitated the forward movement of the spirit.

The second fracture disturbing Deakin's model of political conflict was the emergence of labour parties capable of winning seats. This was 'the most disturbing element in local politics of late years', he wrote in the *Morning Post*, just before the first federal election in March. Protected by his anonymity, he was frank in his assessment of Labor:

their platform is selfish and their discipline admirable. They constitute a caste in politics, and refuse to support representatives who have not been selected from among their own numbers. The consequence is that their members are rarely men of sufficient ability to acquire a Parliamentary status. They help to demoralise politics by bartering their tally of votes for concessions to their class and by their indifference to all other issues.

The first federal election returned sixteen Labor candidates to the Representatives. As neither the Conservative free-traders nor the Liberal Protectionists won an absolute majority, Labor would hold the balance of power. Nevertheless, the Age described the Victorian result as 'A Great Liberal Triumph', with an overwhelming vote for the protectionists. Deakin won his seat with a majority of three thousand, but there was not yet compulsory voting and the turnout was low. Not even 'the catching phrases from the Deakin word factory' could get the apathetic to the polling booth, and dreadful weather kept many at home. The Federation Drought had settled in, with gale-force north winds blowing topsoil from newly cleared land in the Wimmera and Mallee across Victoria. Deakin was in Ballarat for the declaration of the poll and then straight back to Melbourne, where Pattie was ill again. The doctor ordered her to bed and for the next few weeks, before the arrival of a new housemaid, Deakin started his days with 'Home Duties'.

The protectionists did much better in Victoria than in New South Wales, where the free-traders were far more popular than Deakin had bargained for, winning seats with majorities of thousands rather than hundreds.

Commenting on the result in the Morning Post, he noted that the 'brains and substance of the first Federal Opposition' will be fifteen hostile representatives from Barton's own state; and that the breach dividing Victoria and New South Wales showed every sign of deepening provincial jealousies. Although Labor would hold the balance of power, it did not have a united position on the tariff: five of its number were for protection, six for free trade and five undeclared. It was fortunate for Barton, he wrote,

that he had adopted Radical proposals for the exclusion of coloured labour, because it is possible that this may attach to him the votes of the Labor members who are unpledged... It will be a hard task, too, for a man of his somewhat aristocratic tastes to ingratiate himself with the uncourtly members of the working classes who have been elected. Mr Reid is sure to be on friendly terms with them in a very short time.

Nor would the Barton government control the Senate, where free-traders had almost half the seats and there were eight Labor men. Deakin concluded that Barton's 'heart must be inclined to sink when he looks at the material provided out of which he is required to build a new national Parliament and establish a new national policy'.

Deakin's heart sank too, because he knew that he would be doing much of the tactical work needed to steer legislation through two unstable houses. Barton also had to manage a 'cabinet of kings', with five ex-colonial premiers flexing their well-developed muscles in this much larger federal pond. Clashes and arguments among Lyne, Forrest and Kingston were to try Barton's patience sorely over the next few years.<sup>16</sup> Forrest was a big man—literally, at almost twenty stone (127 kilograms)—and used to getting his own way. He had led numerous expeditions of exploration in Western Australia, and after the colony was granted self-government in 1890 he became its first and, until then, only premier.

For the opening of Parliament in May, Australia received its second royal visit. Queen Victoria had died in January, aged eighty-one. She had been queen since 1837, when the grand metropolis of Melbourne was just a few wooden buildings on the Yarra. Her son, Edward, was now king, and he sent his eldest son, the future George V, and his wife to grace the occasion.

As a boy, Deakin had been with his own parents and Catherine in the crowds lining Melbourne's streets in 1867 to glimpse Prince Alfred. Now he was in the official party, welcoming the Duke and Duchess of York when they disembarked at St Kilda, attending the royal levee, dining with Pattie at Government House, the duke and duchess 'very gracious to us both'. Ivy, now almost eighteen, 'came out' into society at a reception at Government House, where she was presented to the duchess and to Lord and Lady Hopetoun.<sup>18</sup> Were it not for the recent death of the queen, it would have been a ball, but gala balls, banquets and race meetings had been replaced with more sedate entertainments, and the dressmakers had been busy with black satin and jet beading for the women's gowns.

The next day Pattie was in the newly decorated Exhibition Building to see her husband sworn in as attorney-general. She wore black voile, a black coat and a handsome steel-sequined toque. Ivy was 'in a fine grey cloth gown, grey hat trimmed with feathers and a white feather boa'. Catherine was no doubt there too, with her mother, Sarah, whose invitation to this historic event survived in Catherine's papers.<sup>20</sup>

That afternoon the seventy-five new members and thirty-six senators assembled in the Victorian parliamentary chambers, which had been lent to the Commonwealth until such time as it had its own parliament house. In the meantime, the Victorian parliament would meet in the Exhibition Building. Frederick Holder, as a compensation for missing

out on a ministry, was elected Speaker. Some few already knew one another from the federation conventions, but most were strangers to each other, and to Melbourne. Over the next few months, Deakin was everywhere, helping the newcomers to feel at home in his city and his Parliament House.

The tall dark figure of Alfred Deakin flitted about the House... like a master of ceremonies, with his bright eyes and smiling face, watching every point, prompting here, advising there, one moment in the Chamber, another in the lobbies, chatting for a few seconds with a member, in consultation with the whip, or cracking a joke with his opponents. He appears to be inhabited by the spirit of restlessness and to be taking a boyish enjoyment in the situation.

This is from a Sydney reporter. Coming under the spell of Deakin's charm for the first time, he called him 'the dark-eyed gipsy of Australian politics' and marvelled at his protean skills.<sup>21</sup> On that first afternoon, the youngest member of the House of Representatives, the new member for Corio, Richard Crouch, waited nervously to second the address in reply. Deakin, no doubt remembering his own nervous excitement in that same chamber twenty-two years earlier, sent him a note: 'In quietness and confidence be your strength.' Deakin's hostile spirit did not, however, extend to inviting his fellow parliamentarians home. Except for Barton and O'Connor, few ever came to Llanarth for dinner or Sunday tea.

The Commonwealth and its parliament were now launched, but the federated union was still only 'formal and legal rather than vital'. The Morning Post correspondent predicted 'much friction, much misunderstanding, and much complaint' in its beginnings.<sup>23</sup> Most of Deakin's letters for 1901 dwell on the difficulties to be overcome to transform the federation from a legal contract into a nation of 'one people': the persistence of parochial loyalties; the difficulties Australia's great distances posed for overcoming them; the state governments' suspicions of the Commonwealth's potential to encroach on their power and status; possible conflict between the House of Representatives and the Senate; the still unresolved question of the tariff; and the instability of the House in which the new ministry's majority depended on the Labor Party, whose success had disrupted the two-party structure Deakin thought indispensable to the proper operations of parliament. The new prime minister would have to cobble together a fresh coalition of support for every major piece of legislation, and Deakin, who was in charge of the House when Barton was away, shared the task.

Deakin was in his prime, alert, full of energy, and doing the work he liked best. Back in 1888, on their sojourn in the Blue Mountains, Deakin had complained to Josiah Royce of the amount of time a minister in the parliamentary system must spend on politics, rather than on administration and legislation. He had never liked the constituency work, with the requests for help with employment, and the lobbying for railways and bridges distracting the legislator from 'matters of a purely public nature', as he had put it when a newly minted member of parliament.<sup>24</sup> Most of this could now be left behind to vex state politicians, while he focussed on the foundational legislation for the new nation.

Much of this legislation was uncontentious machinery legislation to transfer powers and functions from the states to the Commonwealth and to establish the institutions of government. Deakin was not only a great orator, he was a very capable administrator too, methodical, thorough, hard-working, with a quick mind and sharp eye for detail. As attorney-general he was ably assisted by Robert Garran, whom Deakin had requested to be the first secretary of the department.

Garran was a young Sydney lawyer, a passionate federalist like Deakin, and already the author of three books on federation and the constitution, including, with John Quick, *The Annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth*, which quickly became the classic interpretation. Garran found Deakin to have 'the keen analytical mind of the natural lawyer'. With the draft of a difficult opinion, Deakin would take the role of counsel for the other side and attack it from every angle. 'At last he would say, I think you are right but redraft it and let me see it again.'

In July 1901 Deakin became seriously ill with dysentery and influenza. The press reported the cause as 'overwork' but infection too played a role, with Pattie and Vera also becoming ill over the next few weeks. While ill, he wrote another of his out-of-body narratives. Attending a performance of a Beethoven symphony, as the music soars he is 'sucked upwards as if out of the body'. Sloughing off his old self, like a snake shedding its skin, he becomes light, radiant, 'quivering with energy, sensibility...unfolding as if in rapture', among choruses of ecstatic soul companions.

To us, the coincidence of this vision with Deakin's illness points to the effects of fever, and perhaps to a mind under stress, but to Deakin it was evidence of the existence of the soul and the transience of its bodily home, a manifestation of the dual nature of reality, with the divine spirit animating the material world. 'The web & woof of history discloses the Divine pattern thro' the dim light of understanding. The myriad unseen



influences of individuals living or called dead & the myriads of unguessed agencies operating upon & among them without which the secret of life cannot be mastered.’

This is from a prayer written on 4 August 1901, the day after his forty-fifth birthday. It was his first prayer for eighteen months. For the next few months he prayed almost weekly, as an escape from the sleeplessness which increasingly afflicted him, but also as a form of meditation with which, amid the rush of daily events, he could centre himself and scrutinise his motivations. Prayer ‘is an effort to put ourselves in rapport with Him by coming to a better understanding of and with ourselves’, he wrote. ‘Virtue is an ordering of the self—continuous, unflagging and ever wakeful to the best ends one sees.’ In a prayer a week later, Deakin contemplated the idea of progress. ‘The most modern of all ideas and the most fruitful is that of progress, evolution, growth. Swedenborg called it the doctrine of uses and saw all else subordinate to utilities.’

Linking the ideas of progress, evolution and growth to Swedenborg shows just how far Deakin’s thinking was from our own—as well as from his more practically oriented contemporaries. For him, these terms referred to the progress of the spirit in human affairs, the divine pattern dimly disclosed in the ‘web and woof’ of history. They have nothing to do with material, scientific or technical progress, or with economic growth.

Deakin knew that the idea of progress which dominated western nations had a selfish aspect of insatiable appetite and boundless ambition, yet he believed, nevertheless, that ‘progress is towards unselfishness’. If he was to be an instrument in its advance then he had to prepare himself ‘by casting out pride, petulance, the aim for superiority of place...and all anxiety to be understood or appreciated, rewarded or enriched even by spiritual growth’. As his energies returned after his illness, he prayed to be sunk in his work and so ‘lost to my own recollections or calculation of consequences by being absorbed in Thee’.