

PRIME FACTS

AUSTRALIAN PRIME MINISTERS CENTRE

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Alfred DEAKIN

Prime Minister 24 September 1903 to 27 April 1904, 5 July 1905 to 13 November 1908, and 2 June 1909 to 29 April 1910

- Alfred Deakin became 2nd prime minister when Edmund Barton resigned to take a seat on the first bench of the High Court. He was prime minister again in 1905 when the Governor-General rejected a dissolution and replaced George Reid with Deakin. He was also the prime minister in 1909 after defeat of Labor government, forming a coalition or 'Fusion' ministry of anti-Labor Free Traders comprising Liberals, anti-socialists, and John Forrest's 'Corner' group.
- Liberal member of House of Representatives for Ballarat 1901-1913. Attorney-General in first federal Cabinet (1901-1903). Minister for External Affairs (1903-1904, 1905-1908, 1909-1910). Previously he was Liberal member of Victorian Legislative Assembly for West Bourke (1879, 1880-1890), Essendon and Flemington 1889-1900. Chief Secretary in Victoria's coalition government 1883-1890, and held portfolios of Water Supply, Health and Solicitor-General.
- Member of the Protectionist Party.
- Deakin's first term ended when the Protectionist alliance with Labor collapsed and Deakin was replaced by John Christian Watson's Labor government 1904. Second term ended when Labor withdrew its support for a bill to implement the 'new protection policy' and succeeded by Labor leader Andrew Fisher 1908. Third term ended after defeat by the Labor Party led by Andrew Fisher 1910.



Main achievements (1900-1910)

- Key figure in Federation movement and creation of Australia's Constitution. Represented Victoria at debate of Constitution Bill in Imperial parliament in London 1900. Successfully introduced Bill to establish High Court 1902.
- Introduced measures to establish national capital, trans-continental railway, national statistics, meteorology, wireless telegraphy and copyright, contract labour, control of former British New Guinea, first protective federal tariff (New Protection), Commonwealth Literary Fund, Australia's interests in Antarctica, national revenue control, developments in naval and military defence, old-age pensions.
- His Fusion ministry of 1909 represented a coalition of non-Labor forces that reshaped the political party system in Australia and led to a two-party preferred system. Maintained balance and stability during three-way alliance between his Protectionists, the conservative Free Traders, and Labor's socialists.
- Fostered improvements in Australia's military defence 1909-10. Introduced bills to transfer Northern Territory to Commonwealth, set up Inter-State Commission, establish High Commission in London. Negotiated financial agreement for annual per capita grants to State.



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Personal life

- Born on 3 August 1856 at Collingwood, Melbourne. Died 17 October 1919 in Melbourne. Educated at Melbourne Church of England Grammar School. An avid reader. Studied law at the University of Melbourne attending night lectures whilst working as a teacher and tutor during the day. Joined University debating team and Eclectic Association.
- Prominent in the spiritualist movement and became president of Victorian Association of Spiritualists. Active in Theosophical Society to 1896, then joined Australian Church. Member of Protectionist Association, National Anti-Sweating League, Australian Natives Association, Federation League of Victoria, Imperial Federation League (President in 1905), Federal Council of Australasia, National Liberal Organization.
- Admitted to Victorian Bar 1877 but had little enthusiasm for law and began writing poetry, essays and literary criticism. Engaged by David Syme of Melbourne Age to write reviews, leaders and articles. Edited *Leader*, the Age's weekly 1880. Syme influenced him to shift from free trade to protectionist ideals.
- Married Elizabeth Browne, daughter of a prominent spiritualist, 3 April 1882 in Melbourne.

Life after politics

- Remained Opposition Leader until retirement 1913. Chairman of Royal commission into wartime food supplies and prices 1914. Led Australian commission for international exhibition in San Francisco to celebrate opening of Panama Canal 1915. Lived at 'Ballara', Point Lonsdale, Victoria, from 1916. Suffered stroke 1919.

Character

- *[A] tactful smoother of ruffled feathers...a complex character, the outer man the generally charming, confident, intelligent politician, the inner man the often morose, insecure, frustrated intellectual...a gifted politician in an era that lent itself to his natural talents of compromise and persuasion...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.* (Source: *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 8, 1981, pp 255-56)

Did you know?

- A strong advocate for British Empire whilst pursuing Australian naval defence force and universal military service to foster national unity and spirit. His 'vision was of a great white Australia living at one with and within a greater white Empire'.
- Wrote *Quentin Massys: A Drama in Five Acts* (1875), *A New Pilgrim's Progress* (1877), *Irrigated India* and *Temple and Tomb in India* (1893), *The Federal Story* (1944).
- Deakin was present at the hanging of Ned Kelly in 1880.

Sources

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National Archives of Australia: <http://primeministers.naa.gov.au>

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Further reading

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La Nauze, J.A., *Alfred Deakin: A Biography*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1965



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