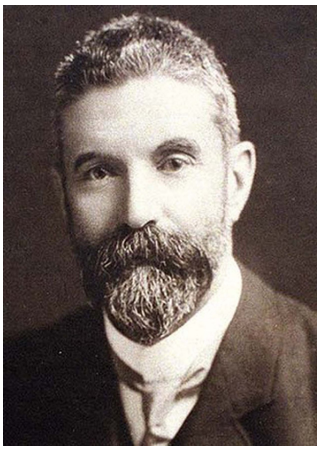
Alfred Deakin
- a key founder of the Australian federation

David d'Lima - FamilyVoice Australia, November 2020



One of Australia's most influential parliamentarians, and a most notable founder of federation, Alfred Deakin (1856-1919) was a civic authority who is worthy of honour, admiration and emulation, as he sought God's wisdom for his work to secure nationhood, and as he served as prime minister - a position he held on three separate occasions.

Elected as a young man to the colonial Parliament of Victoria in 1879, Alfred Deakin began his political career by astonishing his colleagues when delivering his first speech, by using it to resign - owing to electoral irregularities that weighed upon his conscience! He then failed to be returned at the ensuing by-election but emerged from that experience with his integrity intact, eventually gaining re-election.

Around that time, momentum began to build up towards *federation* - the cooperative union of the six Australian colonies, without them dissolving, but working together to form a new nation. With that and other goals in mind, Deakin would walk for hours along the beach at Geelong, praying to God. Seeking to help enable federation, he wrote in his *Boke of Praer and Praes* (26th November 1887):

> *Merciful God I thank Thee. I thank Thee for Thine inexhaustible bounty of experience; for what I might deem a peculiar and personal grace if not ever conscious that I am but the instrument among millions of instruments to perform the part for which I was conceived and reared and trained so far as my faculties would allow. O God, I thank Thee nevertheless for the tide of blessing; for the means of knowledge and for the power which has brought me through many trials without permitting me to fail. ... I thank and thank and praise thee.* [Number XXXIX]

And on 19th August 1888, Deakin composed this prayer, that he may exercise a persuasive influence:

> *O God grant me that judgment and foresight which will enable me to serve my country and grant with these the moral insight and courage to enable me to exercise them without any personal consideration. Preserve me from taking or inducing others to take any path which would lead to injury in the future but guide me and strengthen me so that I may follow and persuade others to follow the path which shall lead to the elevation of national life and thought and permanence of well earned prosperity ... .* [Number XLVll]

Then in the 1890s Alfred Deakin concerned himself with the federation movement, as a delegate to the federal conventions, and as a member of the committees that drafted the emerging Constitution. On 30th March, 1897, he addressed the Adelaide session of the Constitutional Convention as follows:

> *I trust that all of us recognise that upon this Convention rests the responsibility of framing a Constitution for all time - that upon this Convention, and upon this Convention alone, rests the whole burden of Federation at the present moment. ... The Constitution we seek to prepare is worthy of any and every personal sacrifice, for it is no ordinary measure, and must exercise no short-lived influence, since it preludes the advent of a nation. Awed as I feel by the fact that we come from, that we speak to, and that we act for a great constituency, awed as I feel in the presence of those who sent us here, I am more awed by the thought of the constituency which is not visible, but which awaits the result of our labours - we are the trustees for posterity for the unborn millions, unknown and unnumbered - whose aspirations we may help them to fulfil and whose destinies we may assist to determine.*

On 4th June 1898, after the first (partly successful) constitutional referendum, Deakin wrote as follows:

> *Father of Nations, receive our psalm of thanksgiving. Enable us to pursue the cause of unity in spite of the obstacles which at present appear to beset our path elsewhere. Guide us to appeal to that which is best and purest so as to make its development and mastery sure under our forms of government. ... God preserve this people and grant its leaders unselfish fidelity and courage to face all trials for the sake of brotherhood. Thy blessing has rested upon us here yesterday and we pray that it may be the means of creating and fostering throughout all Australia a Christlike citizenship.* [Number CCXXXIII]

On 5th July 1900 the British Parliament agreed the *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act*. The delegation to Westminster included Alfred Deakin, Edmund Barton and Charles Cameron Kingston, who held hands and danced around the room with joy - in response to the decision of the Parliament. Queen Victoria gave Royal Assent to the bill on 9th July 1900, which took effect on 1st January 1901.

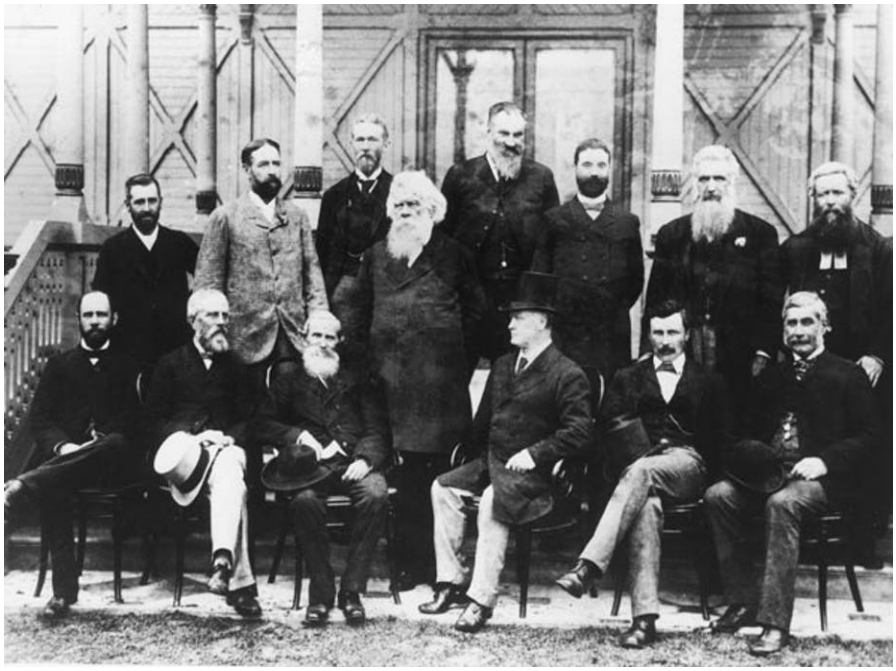
Some time after Federation, Deakin described its achievement of Federation as miraculous:

> *The fortunes of Federalism have visibly trembled in the balance twenty times during the past ten years and have from the first moment to the last been subject to endless unforseen and unpreventable interruptions, any one of which might have indefinitely postponed its triumph. ... Any one of a thousand minor incidents might have deferred it for years or generations. To those who watched its inner workings, followed its fortunes 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* (*The Federal Story*, Melbourne University Press, 2nd ed 1963, p173).

The friendly nature and ability to smooth disagreements led to his nick-name 'Affable Alfred'; his work in large measure helped bring the six separate Australian colonies to cooperate as a new nation.

Deakin served in the Commonwealth Parliament during the early years of federation, as the nation's first attorney-general, and then (in 1903) as Australia's second prime minister. However he resigned as prime minister in 1904, on principle - objecting to what he considered to be unconstitutional action by the government. But he twice returned as prime minister and concluded his time in the Parliament as leader of the opposition, always holding firmly to his keen Christian faith. That was noted especially by his daughter Vera Deakin (Lady White) during a 1960 ABC radio interview:

> *He had tremendously deep religious views, I'm sure of that. He read to us on Sundays from the Bible, from great preachers, and he was deeply, always deeply conscious of being, as he put it, "a tool for providence to work through". Any powers he had he felt he owed to the divine one and it was not his doing.*



Alfred Deakin and other delegates to the Australasian Federation Conference - Melbourne, 1890