Alfred Deakin

Alfred Deakin (1856-1919) was Australia's second Prime Minister and one of the architects of Federation. He was the first Attorney-General of the Commonwealth, and as such, founder of the High Court of Australia in 1901. He served for three terms. As Prime Minister he founded the Arbitration Court, the Australian Navy, as well as choosing Canberra as the nation's capital.

What was his family life like?

He was born on 3 August 1856 in Collingwood, Melbourne, the younger child of William Deakin and Sarah Bill, English migrants who had made a honeymoon voyage to Australia and landed first in Adelaide, where their first child, Catherine Sarah, was born. Then the lure of gold brought the family to Victoria.

His father made a modest living in a variety of jobs eg storekeeping, water carting before becoming a partner and later manager of the coaching business between Melbourne and Bendigo, and with Cobb and Co.

Due to the migration Sarah suffered from depression. This could have contributed to the decision to send Alfred to Kyneton where he joined his sister at a boarding school at a tender age of 4. The separation from his mother at such a tender age had a major impact on Alfred. This probably led to him finding solace in books and became an avid reader, a habit that later became his greatest political asset.

Alfred had a happy and fulfilling marriage to wife Patty and they had three daughters: Ivy, Stella and Vera. His family was a continual source of joy and contentment to him. However, his wife Patty and his sister Catherine who were both very close to him didn’t get on, and there was a lot of friction between them.

Learning

Our childhood and experiences can impact on our adult life but God is a God of restoration and He can turn adversity into triumph, weakness to strength if we let Him.

How did he encounter God?

I believe he was always a seeker. Although some authors claimed he was brought up in a Christian home my own view is that there is probably a mixture of Christianity and other confused beliefs. Reason – parent consulted a gypsy before they came to Australia and allowed the children to dabble in séances when they were in their teens. This probably explained his own spiritual journey.
In his early 20s trying to find his way, he explored spiritualism for instance and became deeply involved with the Victorian Association of Spiritualists and even became the President of the Association. He attended seances, tested phenomena and (at 21) he even published A New Pilgrim's Progress, an allegory of the progress of a soul towards perfection purportedly channelled via Deakin from John Bunyan himself. Fortunately this period only lasted 2 to 3 years.

He then went on to make a deep study of many of the religions of the world, and especially was drawn to the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, a cult. His friend Hodgsn whom he introduced to spiritualism later became the founder of the London Institute for Psychical research and chief investigator in the US o f psychic.

Alfred's view of Christ and of Christianity and the meaning that they held for him personally, changed considerably over the years. For instance he became a member of the Australian church in the 1890s and was a very good friend of the Reverend Charles Strong who began the Australian church. He attended church quite regularly during those years, but he never accepted some of the central tenets of Christianity, like the vicarious atonement (Christ died for the penalty of our sin and was a substitute for us) or final judgement. This is probably due to the influences of Swedenborg.

Charles Strong - Passionately concerned for his fellow men, Strong continued his work for the underprivileged. promoted model lodging-houses in 1883. Interested in education, advocated justice to the Aboriginals, and urged prison reform and, above all, abolition of capital punishment. He also worked for the proper care of mentally defective children. He did many good things but he success as pastor, preacher, liberal theological teacher and social reformer brought him prominence, but he soon aroused suspicion and hostility among a powerful section of the Presbyterian Church.

General William Booth also became a mentor and a friend of his. These men probably shaped his view of Christianity in later years.

His daughter Lady White says of her father "I think 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.

Now Deakin believed that he was an instrument, but he believed that in the sense that we are all instruments of God in one way or another.

In his notes in 1905 Deakin remarks "sufficient to say that the religion of Jesus Christ is the life of the present, the light of the future and the hope of the world."

Many years later he stated: "A life, the life of Christ, that is the one thing needful - the only revelation required is there... we have but to live it."
The following prayers illustrate his burden for the nation of Australia, as well as for holiness and obedience in his own personal life

ALFRED DEAKIN’S PREFACE TO HIS "BOOK OF PRAYER AND PRAISE"

Almost always I realise the existence of God - always I believe in Him with my intellect and turn to Him with my heart but I am anxious for a closer and more permanent relationship

Almost always I believe in the spiritual efficacy of prayer and often I am inclined to pray; sometimes the power to put my cry in words will come - sometimes it will not come

I shall write those prayers I can express so as to open the channel wider and enable me to recall past prayers when I cannot uplift fresh appeals. Let me know my wants if I can know nothing else

He saw Federation as almost a God-given necessity and a mission from God.

Oh God, grant me that judgement and foresight which will enable me to serve my country. 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 the permanence of well-earned prosperity. Give me light and truth and influence for the highest and the highest only.

He would explain in a prayer, so he wrote as he prayed, or he prayed as he wrote, if you like, and he would say Use me!! Use me, use me up!!

Deakin kept a Spiritual Diary and from 1884 to 1913 wrote a "Book of Prayer and Praise" containing nearly four hundred prayers, many relating directly to major decisions in his public life, revealing his utter dependence on God. (For a brief time he joined the Theosophy Society but resigned in 1896)

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<tr>
<th>Learnings</th>
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<tr>
<td>God uses imperfect people, His power is not limited because of our imperfection. Eg uses a donkey.</td>
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<td>Important to know God’s word so that we are not deceived. Jesus warned us about deception. The people were mixing the word of God with mysticism, occult, science and intellectualism just as in the days of the children of Israel.</td>
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<td>We are influenced by the people we associate with – important to have the right people</td>
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<td>God responds to a seeking heart even if they are lost and confused.</td>
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<td>God has the last word – God of the trump card.</td>
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What was his personal journey?

Deakin studied law at the University of Melbourne. By evening he attended lectures, by day he earned pocket-money as a schoolteacher and private tutor.

His earlier career in law wasn't very successful. An introduction in May 1878 to David Syme of the Melbourne Age rescued him from an unsuccessful legal career. Syme, who became a close friend, engaged him as a journalist. Alfred excelled at journalism, which became his major occupation for some five years and provided a useful source of income for most of his life.

It was Syme who turned Deakin from a free trader to a protectionist and it was his work as a journalist that helped direct his attention towards politics. He had always been liberal in tendency; liberals at this time being similar to radicals in England in their belief in the breaking up of the big estates, a protective tariff and in having the support of the working classes. Thus when he was approached by a deputation from the Reform League in 1878 to stand as a candidate in the forthcoming election for West Bourke, he accepted, despite the fact that the election was to be held in less than a fortnight!

After a whirlwind campaign, he defeated the opposition candidate by ninety-seven votes and was elected, at the age of twenty-three, to the Legislative Assembly. Unfortunately an electoral irregularity caused him to resign on principle, which he did at the conclusion of his maiden speech. He fought four more elections over the next eighteen months to secure West Bourke and establish himself in the arena of Victorian politics.

On 3 April 1882 (at 25) Deakin married 19-year-old Elizabeth Martha Anne ('Pattie'), daughter of wealthy Hugh Junor Browne, a prominent spiritualist. The marriage, disapproved of by the Brownes who were wealthier than Alfred's family and who were concerned about his long term prospects. In spite of this they had a happy and fulfilling marriage.

When he was only 35, maybe 40, he began to suffer from chronic insomnia and led him to read and write a lot but it also affected his health greatly.

Deakin retired from Parliamentary life in January 1913 with his health broken and his once magnificent memory virtually non-existent. He found both tasks extremely onerous and his mental state worsened. He passed away on at the age of sixty-three.

Learning

God uses our God given gifts – that gives us a clue of His plans and purposes for
What were his reforms and were they enduring?

Deakin's concern for the welfare of the underprivileged led him to introduce legislation to curb 'sweated' labour and improve conditions in factories. He introduced the Factories and Shops Act of 1885 which, provided for the regulation and inspection of factories, enforced sanitary regulations, limited the hours of work of females and youths, and compensated workers for injury.

He also maintained an interest in the prevention of cruelty to animals for most of his life.

He chaired the 1884 royal commission on irrigation. He introduced the first legislation in Australia to promote an irrigation system and place the ownership of natural waters under the Crown and provided for the construction of state-aided irrigation works by local trusts. Promise of early success faded because of technical problems, poor choice of associates by the Chaffeys, the depression of the 1890s and one of the worst droughts in Australian history. But in the long run successful irrigation and water schemes became a feature of rural Victoria and Australia.

He was Victoria's principal representative at the Colonial Conference of 1887 he fought for colonial interests. He argued forcibly for better terms in the naval agreement, under which the colonies paid an annual subsidy towards the cost of an auxiliary squadron for use in Australian waters.

In his initial years as a politician he was totally opposed to religion and education being connected in any way. But in later 1890s he tried to re-institute religious teaching in State schools although it wasn't successful.

Building a nation

But his main preoccupation in the 1890s was the Federation movement.

Deakin's interest in Federation had been stimulated by Service and heightened by:

- experience at the Colonial Conference of 1887 (represented by two or more representatives each from the six disunited Australian colonies), where colonial division meant they could not overcome the Imperial apathy.
- Recognition that defence of Australia could not be effective without centralised control. This prompted Sir Henry Parkes' famous Tenterfield
speech which was to make Federation a live political issue from this time onwards.

Unfortunately the initial groundswell of support for Federation died away during the depression of the 1890s and the continuing concern over issues such as free trade versus protectionism and states' rights versus the national interest. A further series of conventions were held to discuss the Constitution in 1895, 1897 and 1898 and Deakin was involved in them all.

Deakin spent much of this convention working behind the scenes as a peace-maker, leaving the details to those delegates more suited to this work whilst he concentrated on smoothing the way where parochialism, ego or party issues threatened the process.

Deakin prayed over the proposed Australian Constitution continually and was delighted when the Constitutional Convention unanimously carried the preamble inclusion "humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God"

In the concluding words of his book The Federal Story Deakin remarks that Federation and the Australian Constitution were 'providential' and were secured only 'by a series of miracles'

As a progressive liberal from a large colony he adopted a democratic stance on most issues. He opposed conservative plans for the indirect election of senators and sought a relatively weak 'States House' which he foresaw would be dominated by political parties. On the most vital constitutional issue of all, control of money bills, he tried to limit the Senate's power and make the House of Representatives supreme. He advocated wide taxation powers for the Commonwealth.

As Prime Minister, Deakin was largely responsible for building the basic national government structure by recognising the need for, and fighting to establish, institutions such as the High Court, the Public Service and the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration.

Legislation relating to immigration, trade protection, defence and labour were framed by his Government, which gained an international reputation for experiments in welfare policies and reforms in working conditions. The influence of Charles Strong and General Booth is evident in this regard.

Edmund Barton and Alfred Deakin (nla.pic-an22948286)
Deakin was highly respected and regarded throughout his public life by both sides of the political spectrum. His stature and renown led to him being offered many honours and awards, including a knighthood; however his modesty led him to refuse all these.

He served 3 terms as Prime Minister. His first term (1903-04) was not very successful and there were no legislations passed.

1905-08

His second term of office were amongst the most important for the new Commonwealth. Deakin formed a government with Labour support and proceeded to deal with issues such as welfare, the High Court and the ultimate location of the seat of government. It was during this term that vital aspects of Commonwealth administration were put into place. The Copyright Act of 1905 established the basis for a national, uniform system for copyright and the Quarantine Act of 1908 did similarly for a national quarantine system. The Bureau of Census and Statistics and the Meteorology Bureau were also established during this time, as was the Commonwealth Literary Fund and old-age pensions.

Deakin also took a more independent line than previously with regard to defence and foreign policy - rather than pay for protection from the Royal Navy, he argued strongly for the establishment of an Australian Navy. He also solicited a visit by the US fleet (the 'Great White Fleet'), again flying in the face of British government policy. In his own portfolio of External Affairs, the Papua Act of 1905 established Australian administration and protection for New Guinea.

His government was defeated on 13 November 1908 when Labour withdrew their support over a protection bill. It was during his second term as Prime Minister that he received the first indications of the toll his hard work and responsibilities were taking on his health. His memory began to fail him and he wrote of his concern regarding this in his private journals.

1909-1910 Despite his reluctance to resume responsibilities as head of government, Deakin was forced to take office for the third time because an alliance between the three parties meant that he was the only acceptable candidate to fill the role of Prime Minister! Deakin led a 'Fusion' government, which included Labour, the Protectionists and the Free Traders. Parliamentary
debate during this time was characterised by aggression, vituperation and obstruction, although some useful legislation continued to be passed. This government of opposites was doomed to fail and indeed was defeated resoundingly at the general election on 13 April 1910.

Learning

He was a man ahead of his times in many ways. He was a visionary, passionate, tireless, He sought God, willing to be used.

He fought for the underprivileged (Factories Act), support the working class and break up the big estate.

Works to unite rather than divide – works behind the scenes as a peace maker

He refused recognition from men – accolades and the awards

Summary and things that we can learn

- He turned his adversity into opportunity – his unhappy childhood lead him to develop a passion for reading which later became his greatest political asset.
- He was a fervent and consistent seeker of God, and lived in dependence on God. Despite apparently never embraced some fundamental gospel truths he recognized that he was an instrument of God and depended on God to help him to be effective in his personal and professional life. This is evidenced strongly by the fact that he prayed over the Australian Constitution continually, and is know to have been delighted when the Constitutional Convention unanimously carried the preamble inclusion "humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God".
- He was not afraid to speak out on issues that he felt strongly about. At the 1887 Colonial Conference he boldly spoke out against the Colonial Office and against British foreign policy in the Pacific, much to the horrified surprise of many of the delegates. This boldness and determination allowed him to be instrumental in the establishment of the Australian Constitution.
- He was a peace-maker. At the 1898 and 1899 constitutional conventions Deakin spent much of his time working behind the scenes as a peace-maker doing much to smooth the way where parochialism, ego or party issues threatened the process.
- He gave credit to God for his achievements, declaring in his book The Federal Story that Federation and the Australian Constitution were 'providential' and were secured only 'by a series of miracles'.