

HANDING OVER OF THE PAPERS OF ALFRED DEAKIN  
TO THE NATIONAL LIBRARY, CANBERRA

3RD DECMEBER, 1965

Speech by the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies

Thank you very much. I have great pleasure in accepting these papers, of which we have a token here, on behalf of the National Library.

I don't quite understand how you accumulate papers. Mine, such as I have, are always in a state of chronic disorder, but every time I see Mr. White, the Librarian, he looks at me with a gleam in the eye and refrains, just, from saying to me, "Who will get your papers when you are gone?" and I always disappoint him by saying, "I have none" for then I don't compare myself with Alfred Deakin. I am betraying no secret. I have said it almost time after time that in my opinion Alfred Deakin was the greatest Prime Minister this country ever had and if we ever have one as good in the future, we will be doing very well.

It's a very curious thing, looking back on his work, to realise how frequently immense talents can be obscured by the possession of one, and he had a great talent for speech and this to many people obscured his other talents. There is a rather common disposition to believe that a man who could speak as he could, who had the touch of eloquence that he had must have nothing else, as if it were vox et praeterea nihil. This is a common error. Whereas, of course, the truth was that in constructive thinking, in fundamental thinking, he did things for Australia, of which most people today are unconscious, which still affect every day of our lives. All the foundational policies, not only in the fiscal field, in the defence field, in the industrial field, the pattern of national policy which we have come to accept so much in Australia was laid down by this remarkable man. And of course, as one of the fathers of the Constitution, he has his monument all around him, particularly in this city.

I heard him speak only once and that was when I was a boy, a schoolboy in Ballarat. I don't remember anything about it except that I did hear him speak. It wasn't a very intellectual phase of my life. I was about thirteen, I think, but he was the Member for Ballarat and I was at school in Ballarat. But ever since I came to man's estate, I've been fascinated by him, by his personality and by his work, and for years, I felt there was something missing in Australia because we had not had beyond Walter Murdoch's monograph a definitive life, some substantive volume about Deakin, based on all the information that has accumulated about him.

I am glad this error has now been repaired. In fact this is a sort of heyday because not only has Professor La Nauze enriched us with his two tall volumes but Rohan has written a fascinating book, Mrs. Bookes, on your most distinguished husband, and therefore this is, in a sense, a vintage Deakin year. And I am very glad that after this great interval of time it should be happening, but I suppose it is part of ordinary fate that men of great note should fade away for a period in the memory of people; should be criticised, should be denigrated in many ways.

I remember one night in England saying to Winston Churchill, "You know, by the time you have been dead for ten years, an event which I hope will be long postponed, clever young men at Oxford and Cambridge will write books about you explaining that never once in the whole of your life were you right." He said, "Do you think so?" And I said, "I'm sure of it, but don't worry about it because twenty years after that, they will all be forgotten and you will still be up there in the history of the nation."

This is occurring in the case of Alfred Deakin. These events all help to recreate him in the public imagination and in the minds of readers and thinkers in years to come, and thinking as I do about that, I am delighted - I think it is a wonderful stroke of luck - to be here as Prime Minister at a time when these papers are being handed over and to be able to say something from my heart in the presence of his family.

---