The first four Prime Ministers

Robert Broinowski[*]

Edmund Barton

With amazing rapidity the Parliament settled down to the prosaic and daily round occupying the Melbourne Parliament House as if it were an ancestral home. Romance in politics was ended, and the sittings were nothing if not practical. The first session lasted for eighteen months, during which a solid phalanx of Free-traders fought the passage of a revenue tariff with bitter and dreary persistency in both Houses. But many measures were passed in fulfilment of the promises made by the Prime Minister in his policy speech. The *Immigration Restriction Act* and The *Pacific Islands Laborers' Act* secured a White Australia, and amongst others were an *Act* taking over the administration of the Post Office, *the Commonwealth Public Service Act*, *Commonwealth Electoral Act*, the *Judiciary Act* establishing the High Court, and the *High Court Procedure Act*. The two latter *Acts* were made law in the second session.

In 1902 the Prime Minister attended the Coronation ceremonies in London, and was created Knight Grand Cross of St Michael and St George, and received degrees from various Universities.

When the High Court was established, many of his friends and colleagues attempted to persuade Sir Edmund to take the position of Chief Justice, but he refused, as he considered that Sir Samuel Griffith was entitled to that office. However, he agreed to accept the position of Senior Puisne Judge. And so in September, 1903, Sir Edmund resigned his office of Prime Minister and took his seat on the bench of the High Court. (92–3)

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In his speeches he loved to play upon his audiences, and to exercise his histrionic abilities. He knew the value of impressive pauses, of a sudden burst of fiery eloquence, or a sudden effect created by a dramatic sentence such as 'God means to give us this

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Federation.' In the cause he led he was a prophet, declaiming in an ever burning enthusiasm, yet turning when necessary to keen and cold analysis.

When the heat of the Federal conflict had died down and he found himself Prime Minister and leader of a Parliamentary Party, his enthusiasm had nothing to feed upon, and so he relaxed and again was called lazy. Towards the end of his term in the Commonwealth Parliament, Sir Edmund appeared to lose interest in the proceedings, though now and again the fire of his intellect would burn again as when he introduced an important measure, or led an attack on the Opposition, or intervened in a debate that seemed to threaten his Government. The truth was that he was always impatient of party warfare, and in that domain, therefore, he failed. He was not cunning enough; he hated intrigue; he moved always in the grand manner, and he could not stoop. In his own words, he found that 'this was no united Parliament seeking to secure the stability of Federation. Instead there was rancorous party strife and scuffling on the steps of the temple.

To his last day in Parliament, however, he retained his dominating presence. He was listened to always in comparative silence, and when he spoke members knew it was the Prime Minister speaking, and they streamed into the Chamber when it was known that 'Barton was up.' (94–5)

Alfred Deakin

In 1903 Deakin succeeded Edmund Barton as Prime Minister upon the appointment of the latter as a Judge of the High Court. From that point Deakin's pathway was strewn with difficulties. There were three parties in the House — Government, Opposition and Labour, the latter supporting Deakin. A number of his supporters considered that the Labour Party was gaining too much influence, and left Deakin to join the Opposition under G. H. Reid.

In 1904 Deakin took as vital a proposed amendment to the Conciliation and Arbitration Bill providing for the inclusion of State railway employees in the scope of the Bill. Upon a division being taken, the Deakin Ministry was defeated by a combination of the Labour Party and the Opposition led by Reid. J. C. Watson, Leader of the Labour Party, then took office, but six months later he, too, was defeated on an amendment to the Conciliation and Arbitration Bill dealing with preference to unionists.

A fusion then took place between the Deakin and Reid parties. Reid was given a commission to form a Government, and with Allan McLean, of Victoria, as co-partner, took office. Deakin would not agree to join this Government, preferring to remain a private member.

Some months later Deakin and some of his close supporters suspected that Reid, with the assistance of Conservative members, was attempting to weaken the Protectionist Party in Victoria. Rightly or wrongly believing this, Deakin made a speech at Ballarat which was so hostile in character that it ended the prospects of the Reid–McLean Government. Foreseeing its end, the Ministry came before the House without a programme, and indicated that it would seek a dissolution. Thereupon Deakin, with the aid of the Labour Party, by an adverse vote forced the resignation of the government. In taking this course, Deakin incurred severe criticism and condemnation, and his desertion

of his two old and tried friends and colleagues, Sir George Turner and Allan McLean, caused a number of his supporters to turn away from him in the political field.

Deakin retained office for three years with the support of the Labour Party, and during that time much useful legislation was passed. During this term as Prime Minister, he attended an Imperial Conference in London, and once again impressed the various representatives with his eloquence and his grasp of the Empire affairs.

Now the ties between the Government and the Labour Party were weakening, and the movement within that party to ban alliances was gaining ground. Finally, in 1908, Andrew Fisher announced in the House that the Labour Party would no longer support the Government. On the next day Fisher moved an adverse motion, and with the help of the Reid Party defeated the Ministry, which thereupon resigned. Fisher was sent for by the Governor-General and agreed to take office, facing two opposition parties in the House. Such a situation could not last. The non-Labour parties decided to form a fusion Government, the Labour Party was forced to resign, and Deakin took office again as Prime Minister, with Joseph Cook as his co-partner. The stout old warrior, George Reid, was appointed High Commissioner for the Commonwealth in London. (98–9)

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In his prime, Alfred Deakin was a tall, handsome man, dark-haired, with a beard that grew to his cheekbones. He was vivacious, quick in his movement, bright-eyed, unresting, and with little short of dynamic activity. He was a difficult man to serve. A secretary might make close research in connexion with a political or national problem, but would only be allowed to give the headings to his chief, for Deakin's mind would fill in the details as his listened. His anticipation at times was uncanny. Pressmen said that when they went on tour with him they found him the most delightful of travelling companions, full of boyish fun and ready for practical jokes. He never forgot that he had been a pressman himself, and so he never failed to acknowledge a piece of good work and to express appreciation to an editor. He wrote the drafts of his speeches, and would never delegate that work to his secretaries. He preferred to plan his speeches to lay down a line of argument, and indicate the actual wording. But he was a natural orator, and so he clothed his reasoning and his facts with a flow of eloquence, and when roused by opposition he would deliver himself with burning and passionate phrases.

Apart from his statesmanship, Deakin was a shrewd and clever politician. He knew the rules of the political game both in its cut and thrust and in its secret ways. How otherwise could he have led a government for three years with only fifteen followers in a House of seventy-five members? He was the despair of pressmen and of deputations when he did not wish to pledge himself to a course. He would charm them with eloquence and send them away delighted, but only after leaving his door would they realize that they had nothing material to take with them. It can be safely said that Deakin had all the faults of a politician and all the virtues of a statesman. He was a statesman because of his creed. At the Adelaide Federal Convention in 1897 he said, in closing a speech: 'We are trustees for posterity, for the unborn millions, unknown and unnumbered, whose aspirations we may help to fulfil, and whose destinies we may assist to determine.' That was Deakin's creed, that was the basis of all his political philosophy and his service. (99–101)

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Statesman as he was, Deakin could, when he wished, be gay and debonair, humorous and satirical. For instance, in reply to a bitter speech from W. M. Hughes on being displaced from office, Deakin said: 'The Honourable member reminds me of an urchin dragged screaming from the tart shop.' Even to this day ministerial office is often described as 'the tart shop.' In his Ballarat speech, he referred to Reid's policy speech as a 'necklace of negatives.' On his return from India, he described that country as a country where red tape was king and sealing was high priest. Referring to a somewhat indeterminate speech by a member of the Opposition, Deakin said: 'The honourable member reminds me of a dog eating its own tail. Wherever else he fails he at least succeeds in making both ends meet.' Listening to what he considered a hypocritical and moaning speech, Deakin interjected with a quotation from Shakespeare: 'Let the galled jade wince; our withers are unwrung.' As a rule, he did not reply to interjections, but wove them into his speech in such a manner, and so inverted, that they assisted his argument. (101–102)

J. C. Watson

Watson was a man of extraordinary will power which, amid the turbulence of party politics, enabled him to keep cool and to remain master of himself. He was always sane and logical in his thoughts and actions.

He was nearly six feet in height, and of good and well-proportioned physique, with kindly blue eyes, a broad forehead, and a natural and amiable manner. In his political days he wore a pointed beard, and he was always neat in his attire. His voice was pleasant, but when moved he could send its echoes ringing through the Chamber.

One noted journalist described him as 'the most lovable and attractive of all Labour leaders since the beginning of Federation. Shrewd, earnest, polite, insistent when practical reforms were ahead, personally likeable, and fair in debate, he stood amongst the big men of the first Federal Parliament.'

His virtues were many, but the question might be put: What were his faults? The answer would be that they were those born of his disposition, of his fine spirit, namely, modesty and restraint, lack of ambition, gentleness where severity was more appropriate and a too small conceit of himself. In the average politician these would be virtues; in John Christian Watson they were faults that interfered with his career. (105)

George Reid

In the first Federal election campaign Reid took the field as acknowledged Leader of the Freetrade Party, but was defeated by the combined forces of the Protectionists and the Labour Party. When Parliament met he was elected Leader of the Opposition, the Prime Minister being Edmund Barton. During the eighteen months of the first Federal session, Reid and his followers fought almost every item of the Customs tariff; but their attacks were like waves beating against a rock, and their steadfastness was only surpassed by that of the two Ministers, Sir George Turner and Charles Cameron Kingston, who showed little inclination to compromise.

In September, 1903, Edmund Barton resigned to become a Judge of the High Court, and Alfred Deakin succeeded as Prime Minister. The brilliance of the verbal warfare

between Deakin and Reid very often attained the standard of a *tour de force* not to be easily forgotten. They were both masters of eloquence and satire. They never were friends, and consequently the acid sometimes spilled with their words. (108)

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In appearance Sir George was a man of medium height, with a high-domed and wide forehead, a double chin, short nose, and a heavy moustache over a full mouth. He was partly bald, and in his younger days had red hair. He had quiet eyes, surprising eyes, because when he was challenged or excited they would flame and protrude, always anticipating the crushing reply that was coming. He was heavy in body, and it was often said of him that he represented the triumph of mind over matter. He wore a top hat and a frock coat that descended to his knees, and added to his ungainly appearance. He had a harsh and high-pitched voice, which he would reduce to a drawl when replying to and crushing an interjector. Invariably he turned the laugh to his own advantage. 'Humour in politics,' he said, 'must be a particular sort of humour, the humour that bites and stings, but yet is not vicious, that stings not the man but the fallacy.' Yet he was an orator with a remarkable command of English, but being a politician to whom popularity was life he had perforce to use his powers to retain that necessity. And so he would clown it that he might carry his audience with him. Too often his eloquence and imagination were kept in the background. So his political meetings were an entertainment to the man in the street, and rarely an inspiration. His enemies called him 'the king of the mob'; he was the people's jester, the caterer of amusement. It was said of him that he sought success, and did not hesitate to play the fool to obtain it. In his reminiscences he says:-

> I was called a clown and buffoon, but there was method in the way I set out to amuse my audience . . . I don't care where you belong, you will open more doors to the understanding and interests of those you address by humorous fancies than by any other means. When his audience is smiling, a speaker's best opportunity for impressing and persuading has been won.

It is customary when speaking of Sir George, as we all knew him, to give some examples of his humour, and I shall ask no pardon for following the custom.

One night in the Legislative Assembly, Reid dropped off to sleep after debating the subject of what ought to be considered a workshop within the meaning of the Factories and Ships Act. Presently he woke himself with a loud snore. Everyone laughed, and Reid drawled, 'That's a workshop!'

In the ranks of the Opposition there was a member who was enamoured of the subject of public finance, and whenever he spoke he brought in his pet subject and set out his theories. One night this member was speaking in the same manner as usual. Reid fell asleep in his chair. Sir John See asked the Speaker to call the Premier to order, as it was unseemly for him to be asleep in the Premier's chair when in charge of a debate. In his familiar drawl, Reid said: 'Mr Speaker, I was not asleep, I was merely endeavouring to come mentally oblivious of the honourable and financial nuisance opposite.'   ▲