

Pattie Deakin: from Prime Minister's wife to 'Intercessor-in-Chief'

Paper read at the third Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Library Conference,
Adelaide, 28-30 September 2005

Pattie Deakin was only the second ever Prime Minister's wife, thus it was a role that was still in its infancy when her husband became Prime Minister. Arguably, it would have been possible for a Prime Minister's wife at this time to use her status to create a role for herself and for the following Prime Ministers wives. However the reasons why this did not occur are interesting in that they demonstrate how fluid politics were at the time and how much circumstance and the wishes and desires of individuals could over ride any official or semi official notions and expectations of roles.

Pattie Deakin's predecessor, Jane Barton, was the first Prime Minister's wife, from May 1901 to September 1903. Jane was a mature woman when her husband became Prime Minister – she was fifty, well educated and generally regarded as being charming and socially adept. Her husband's biographer, Geoffrey Bolton, states that "She was evidently an intelligent woman, who played the piano, wrote with a good hand, and with little preparation held her own in upper-class society in London, but she has left remarkably little trace of her own thoughts and feelings."¹ Jane supported her husband in his work for Federation and campaigned actively, becoming a Vice President of the Women's Federal League in Sydney, a society formed to promote Federation.² She was active on committees and worked hard for her husband and for the cause of Federation.

The main circumstance which probably worked against her developing the role of Prime Minister's wife and making it her own (something she was undoubtedly clever enough and capable enough to see as something worth doing, for her husband if not herself) was that she and her husband were both from Sydney. Parliament sat in Melbourne and the Bartons were unable to afford the expense of establishing a second home there, thus Jane and her husband were separated during sitting weeks and any other form of Parliamentary activity whilst she remained in Sydney with their six children and Edmund stayed in Melbourne.³ She did accompany Edmund to England in 1900, 1902 and 1915 where the Bartons "...found themselves moving easily in a closed society intolerant of the parvenu or the ill behaved."⁴ However Jane, although undoubtedly capable of acting upon her new status and creating a role of interest to herself and of use to her husband, was unable to do so fully because of her inability to relocate to Melbourne, the centre of the new Parliament.

Pattie Deakin was born in 1863 and married Alfred in 1882. She was forty - ten years younger than Jane - when she first became Prime Minister's wife in 1903. Her family was smaller and her daughters were older and more established – in 1903 Ivy was twenty, Stella was seventeen and Vera was twelve. Pattie was a confident Melbourne girl from a well-to-do local family, being the eldest daughter of eleven children. By the time Alfred became Prime Minister, he and Pattie had their own home in South

¹ G. Bolton, *Edmund Barton: the one man for the job*, Allen & Unwin, Australia, 2000, p.xii.

² H. Irving, 'Fair Federalists and Founding Mothers', *A Woman's Constitution? Gender and history in the Australian commonwealth*, ed. H. Irving, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1996, p.12.

³ Bolton, p.238.

⁴ *ibid.* p.272.

Yarra and were comfortably placed financially with a small number of servants to help them.⁵

Seemingly, she was perfectly placed to step into the role of Prime Minister's wife and make it into anything she chose, but again, this did not happen. Like Jane Barton, it was circumstances beyond her control that prevented her from creating a fulfilling role for herself as Prime Minister's wife and that therefore delayed any expectations for the role in future.

In Pattie's case, it was her own ill health and the wishes of her husband that prevented her from making use of her role. She suffered from chronic gynaecological problems and had two miscarriages during her marriage. She was placed under the care of a specialist whilst in London when she and Alfred travelled there in 1900 to see the passing of the constitution bill through the English Parliament. There was even talk of an operation (probably a hysterectomy) but this did not happen, to Pattie's regret. Whilst in London she was extremely ill and although able to go on some quiet excursions, was forced to rest for most of her visit, even declining an invitation to visit the Queen at Windsor.⁶ Pattie almost literally 'took to her couch' after the birth of her last daughter in 1891 until well into the 1900s. She was also a very poor traveller and suffered badly from sea sickness whenever she accompanied Alfred abroad.

Despite her ill health, she was a noted hostess, being both charming and gracious, but both she and Alfred preferred a simple, domestic life with their family. It is suggested that Pattie saw her role largely in terms of caring for Alfred and his health, relieving him of domestic worries and protecting him from unnecessary intrusions.⁷ Their home was very much a family home and was maintained as a retreat, a domestic haven. They had a very small circle of friends – mostly intellectual and professional people. As he became increasingly well known, they entertained more widely and frequently, but generally in a fairly simple and unpretentious manner, and would even turn down Vice-Regal invitations if at all possible. Alfred considered his home and his family to be his sanctuary, thus it was primarily his desire to keep it separate from his official life and Pattie considered it to be her duty to support him in this.⁸

The year 1907 was to be a turning point in both their lives. It was in this year that Pattie accompanied Alfred to England for the Imperial Conference. Alfred had a punishing schedule of engagements and it was after the Conference that the first indications arose of the health problems that were to shorten his life and affect his mind and memory. Pattie also found the hectic pace of the engagements she was expected to attend exhausting, and to her consternation, Lady Jersey requested that she speak to the Primrose League, an association for Conservative women. Pattie tried hard to avoid this task, on the basis that she had never spoken in public before,

⁵ Pattie Deakin has been the subject of some exemplary biographical work by Diane Langmore (*Prime Ministers' Wives: the public and private lives of ten Australian women*, McPhee Gribble, Australia, 1992 and 'My Cherished and Almost Worshipped Wife': the marriage of Alfred and Pattie Deakin', *Voices*, vol. 4, no. 2, Winter, 1994, pp.69-80) and John Rickard (*A Family Romance: the Deakins at home*, Melbourne University Press, 1996) and my outline of her life is based on these sources.

⁶ Langmore, *Prime Ministers' Wives*, pp.21-2.

⁷ *ibid.* p.19.

⁸ *ibid.* pp.19-20.

however Lady Jersey was insistent and Pattie found herself speaking about the lives of women in Australia. She prepared her talk herself, as Alfred was unable to help her because he was so busy.⁹ However her speech was very well received and Pattie was a popular figure in London society at that time.

On her return to Melbourne, Pattie became involved in the Australian Exhibition of Women's Work. She chaired a committee which organised a nursery and kindergarten at the Exhibition Buildings and this proved to be a very well patronised part of the exhibition. Pattie had become involved in this project through her friendship with Lady Northcote, the Governor-General's wife. She had previously been involved in private charity work, but after 1907, her involvement in charity became increasingly formalised and public. Diane Langmore suggests that her appreciative reception in London, her success with the crèche at the exhibition, the fact that her youngest daughter was now seventeen and her friendship with Lady Northcote all gave impetus to her already existing interest in welfare, especially that of women and children.¹⁰ The success of the crèche at the exhibition led to the formation of the Free Kindergarten Union and the Association of Crèches and paid for the establishment of the Bush Nursing Association. Pattie became President of the Free Kindergarten Union and an active committee member of the other associations. In 1912, she was asked to be President of the Lyceum Club, a new association for professional women. Despite intermittent ill health, Pattie became increasingly busy with her committee work, the nature of which occasionally caused her some problems.

Her presidency of the Free Kindergarten Union of Victoria was one such example. Pattie had been President since its inception in 1908, but resigned in acrimony in 1911, together with the Secretary and an executive committee member over the resignation of the Union's supervisor of training. The nature of the controversy is complex¹¹ but seems to have been caused partly through the defective nature of the constitution of the Kindergarten Union which left the supervisor without membership of the Education sub-committee, thus isolating her from what was going on. Originally the Union trained its own kindergarten teachers but entered into an arrangement with the Education Department for a system of joint training. This increased formalisation, virtually a joint venture between a small voluntary organisation and a large government department, was cause for concern for Pattie and the others. Pattie deplored what she perceived to be an increased tendency towards formal education, rather than fostering the 'play instinct' in little children.¹²

Although this must have been a distressing experience, Pattie continued her charity work. However it was to be the onset of the First World War that enabled her to help others in a way that was both richly rewarding for her and of genuine benefit to those she helped. Pattie was part of the Anzac Buffet at No. 5 Australian General Hospital in St Kilda Road, Melbourne from its beginnings on 3 August 1915 to its closure on

⁹ *ibid.* p.27.

¹⁰ *ibid.* p.30.

¹¹ but is well explained by Lyndsay Gardiner, *The Free Kindergarten Union of Victoria 1908-80*, Australian Council for Educational Research, 1982, pp.21-3.

¹² Gardiner, p.25 and Free Kindergarten Union of Victoria Executive Minutes, 30 Oct. 1911, University of Melbourne archives, 83/121.

11 November 1919.¹³ The Buffet appears to have begun on a very informal basis – according to reports, in the early days of the war, a group of women were drawn to the hospital to offer their services on a voluntary basis. This group almost certainly included both Pattie and Jane McMillan who was the committee member of the Free Kindergarten Union who resigned in 1911 with Pattie. They quickly saw the need for a system to supply refreshments to the soldiers waiting for embarkation, as well as to those waiting to be seen at the hospital, as the waits were often considerable.¹⁴

The women quickly acquired a tea pot, cups and saucers and an oil stove and were then provided with an Army bell tent for shelter, from which they did a roaring trade providing drinks and sandwiches to soldiers waiting to embark and to Returned wounded outpatients. Authorities helped enlarge their premises, giving them a proper roof, gas jets and more equipment, thus demonstrating the value that conservatively minded military authorities placed upon the work of the Buffet. By the end of the war they were serving over 1000 soldiers a day, for the nominal sum of a penny each. The men could have a cup of tea, coffee, cocoa, milk or squash, and freshly made sandwiches, cakes or pies. All the workers at the Buffet were voluntary and most of the food was donated. The Buffet was financed by donations and gifts ‘in kind’ of food; other supplies were purchased at wholesale prices, but for the duration of the war, the Buffet never needed to appeal to the public to raise money to continue its operations.¹⁵

The Buffet had a very simple organisational structure: Pattie was the head, or ‘Directoress’; there was a superintendent (Mrs Jane McMillan) and a brigade leader (Miss Irene Hawkins).¹⁶ Apart from these women, there were a large number of other volunteers, although everyone was involved in the day to day work of cleaning, food preparation, serving and washing up.¹⁷ However much of the administrative work was done by Pattie and Jane McMillan. They kept and signed off on a simple balance sheet which was properly audited and sent to the Minister of Defence each year.¹⁸ Other than that, formal administration appears to have been kept to a minimum and this is seen as being one of the strengths of the Buffet and the services it offered as: “There is no fussy committee, no wrangling election of office bearers. The soldiers’ needs are simply catered for ...”¹⁹

These needs quickly grew beyond the just the provision of meals. The Buffet soon became an informal advice and assistance bureau. A newspaper clipping from 1916 has a section underlined by Pattie which reads: “The Soldier’s Refreshment Stall is not only a feeding place but a place of refuge – a place of rest – a place where a man knows he may find a ready and sympathetic listener for his woes and joys alike.”²⁰

¹³ Pattie Deakin, letter to Director, Australian War Memorial, 27 June 1921 (AWM 93 7/4/620).

¹⁴ Philip Ray, ‘The S.R.S.’, *The Argus*, 25 Nov. 1916.

¹⁵ *ibid.* and ‘Refreshment Tent, Base Hospital’, *Punch*, 16 Dec. 1915.

¹⁶ *M.&H. Magazine: a magazine published in the interests of the military hospitals and repatriated sailors and soldiers*, Dec. 1918, p.140.

¹⁷ F.C. Hawker, *No.5 Australian General Hospital (Base Hospital Melbourne)*, Speciality Press, Melbourne, n.d. [c.1918-9].

¹⁸ ‘Anzac Soldiers’ Refreshment Stall, no. 5 Australian General Hospital, Statements of Receipts and Expenditure’, 30 Aug. 1915 to 21 Aug. 1916, 22 Aug. 1916 to 21 Aug. 1917, 22 Aug. 1917 to 31 Aug. 1918, 1 Sept. 1918 to 4 Aug. 1919, 5 Aug. 1919 to 11 Nov. 1919 (AWM 93 7/4/620).

¹⁹ ‘Refreshment Tent, Base Hospital’.

²⁰ Ray (underlining found on copy in AWM93 7/4/620, formerly owned by Pattie Deakin).

A contemporary description of the operation of this 'bureau' states that: "The directoress [Pattie] and superintendent [Jane McMillan] can do much more to move the wheels of officialdom than the ordinary citizen. Thousands of wives and mothers of soldiers have been helped to secure information of their men when all other sources had failed. Muddled pay accounts have been straightened out and relief afforded to soldiers' dependents."²¹ A further description states that: "To the left as you enter [the Buffet] is a little office, which may well be known as a Sanctuary. Here two large-hearted ladies [Pattie and Jane] are in attendance every day, eager and ready to give help in untying many a tortuous knot that encumbers some soldier, who has returned to find things gone awry in his absence."²² The help offered took various forms and could include emotional support, practical advice or material assistance.

Pattie obviously had a sympathetic personality and was able to talk to soldiers and their families in a way that was meaningful and useful. An example is given of a soldier who grew up with only a father in the remote bush. He enlisted in 1915 and found Melbourne a very strange place, but was introduced to the Buffet and was befriended by Pattie who talked to him and gave him advice. Three years later he was wounded abroad and sent to Harefield Hospital in England. He returned to Australia to be admitted to No. 5 Australian General Hospital – the nature of his wounds are not made clear, but it was stated that his nerves were shattered, he had a tremor and his gait was weak and halting. After his release from hospital, he would regularly present violets to Pattie, who still remembered him after three years. He was unable to speak to her, but came back with flowers whenever he could.²³

The Buffet also had a cash fund, called 'Soldier's Aid', which Pattie and Jane could use at their discretion to provide additional assistance. It appears on the balance sheets at just over one hundred pounds, of which approximately one third was repaid (although repayment was voluntary). As the sum paid out did not usually exceed ten shillings, this indicates considerable and widespread help.²⁴ An example is given of a returned soldier who was to go interstate and who had no money, but had an extremely ill sister in Footscray. A taxi was arranged to take him to his sister and then return him to Spencer Street railway station. In another case a woman with two children whose husband was missing had her pay allotment stopped because the authorities believed he was absent without leave. She was in very difficult circumstances, so money was provided for her immediate needs and the authorities were then persuaded to give her a small allowance.²⁵

This was the other aspect of the work of the bureau and of Pattie: "The busy 'head' finds herself continually called upon to relinquish her sandwich-cutting, and devotes most of her time in ably filling the role of "Intercessor". Where soldiers and soldiers' relations find difficulty in approaching Red Tape and Officialdom, and might meet with brusqueness and harsh apathy at the hands of overworked officials regarding their petty affairs ... the Intercessor-in-Chief has set to rights many a wrong ..."²⁶

²¹ 'The Anzac Buffetiers', *The Herald*, Thurs, April 1919.

²² *The No.5: a magazine published by the patients and staff of No.5 Australian General Hospital, St Kilda Road, Melbourne*, Aug. 1918, p.20.

²³ 'The Anzac Buffetiers'.

²⁴ Ray, 'The S.R.S.' and 'Anzac Soldiers' Refreshment Stall, Statements of Receipts and Expenditure'.

²⁵ 'The Anzac Buffetiers'.

²⁶ 'Refreshment Tent, Base Hospital'.

Pattie was notorious for her ability to call on "... adjutants, generals, etc and every Brass Hat in Melbourne came to know and dread her visits. She obtained direct news, in many cases, for the unfortunate relatives ..."²⁷ One can only assume that the adjutants and generals were unable to avoid an ex-Prime Minister's wife or avoid doing what she asked, much as they must have disliked this breach of protocol. Pattie herself must also have enjoyed the directness of the work compared to her previous committees and voluntary work – the way she was able to make a difference in a very real and immediate way, without the entanglement of red tape or personalities.

Interestingly, Pattie's youngest daughter, Vera, who had been in London studying music at the outbreak of the war, returned to Australia to study with the Red Cross in order to better contribute to the War effort. She volunteered at the Anzac Buffet²⁸, prior to travelling to Cairo in 1915 where the day after her arrival she opened the Wounded and Missing Inquiry Bureau for the Red Cross. The Bureau was largely volunteer-run and aimed to find information on behalf of the relatives of Australian soldiers at Gallipoli. In 1916, the Bureau moved to London where it continued its operations. It was extremely popular, as relatives felt that the Bureau's explanations were more helpful than those of the military, and it grew until it was receiving up to 25,000 inquiries a year.²⁹ It is possible that the nature of the help that Vera felt drawn to give may have been influenced by her mother and the work she was doing at the Anzac Buffet.

As the Buffet was winding down in 1919, it became clear that it would not be able to do so fully without those involved incurring some financial penalty, so Pattie put the case before William A. Watt, who was acting Prime Minister, Treasurer, a former colleague of her husband and a visitor to their beach house at Point Lonsdale!³⁰ He wrote to Treasury stating that he had examined the accounts of the Buffet and felt that a once only grant of three hundred pounds would enable the Management of the Buffet to wind up their affairs without heavy personal liability.³¹ Treasury obviously felt that they had no choice but to comply, so Pattie was sent a cheque for three hundred pounds immediately. She wrote to thank the relevant senator for the money and the acknowledgement, not of her or the work of the Buffet, but of the "great service of our boys".³²

Pattie was justly proud of the work that she and the other volunteers had performed and noted how much she would miss her work when the Buffet and the hospital closed.³³ She stated that "there was no other work similar to ours in Melbourne."³⁴ However this pride did not include any quest for personal publicity. Although several articles appeared in newspapers giving detailed accounts of the Buffet and the work of

²⁷ *Smith's Weekly*, 16 Feb. 1935 (clipping from NLA MS1540/19/418).

²⁸ *M.&H. Magazine*, Dec. 1918, p.140.

²⁹ E. Scott, *Official History of Australia in the war of 1914-1918: Australia during the war*, vol. xi, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 7th ed., 1941, pp.707-8; E.F. Schneider 'The British Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau: a case of truth-telling in the Great War', *War in History*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1997, pp. 296-301.

³⁰ Brookes family 'Arlpa' Point Lonsdale photograph album, c.1910-20; Deakin University Library.

³¹ W.A. Watt, letter to the Treasurer, 27 June, 1919 (Anzac Buffet at no.5 AGH, NAA, MP367/1, 552/2/101).

³² Pattie Deakin, letter to Senator Russell, 9 July, 1919 (Anzac Buffet, NAA, MP367/1, 552/2/101).

³³ Pattie Deakin, letter to Senator Pearce, 19 Nov. 1918 (Anzac Buffet, NAA, MP367/1, 552/2/101).

³⁴ Pattie Deakin, letter to Director, Australian War Memorial, 27 June 1921 (AWM 93 7/4/620).

the voluntary helpers, no names were ever mentioned and several of the articles mention specifically that the writer was requested in the strongest terms, not to use the names of any of the women involved.³⁵

After the war and the death of her husband in 1919, Pattie continued her involvement with soldiers' charities. She became the only woman trustee of Sir Samuel McCaughey's Bequest for the education of the children of deceased or incapacitated soldiers and attended meetings assiduously. Between 1920 and 1922 the Trustees met 64 times and Pattie attended 56, making her the second highest attendee. She served on this Trust until her death in 1934.³⁶

Pattie was very much a woman of her time. Although intelligent and competent her role as Prime Minister's wife was largely a supportive one and fortunately, this suited both her and her husband. Ironically, it was not until after the onset of her husband's mental and physical decline, and after his retirement from politics that she was able to give full rein to her abilities. Her work for soldiers and their families during World War I demonstrated clearly her capacity for hard work, her sympathetic nature and her ability to get things done. She was in a fortunate and virtually unique position, where she was able to use her status to solve problems for people and make a difference without being shackled by committees and other forms of organisational structure. This must have been a very rewarding time for her.

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³⁵ Articles in *Punch* 1915, *Argus* 1916, *Herald* 1919, already cited. Located in AWM 93 7/4/620.

³⁶ J.G. Fussell, *A Record of the Administration of Sir Samuel McCaughey's Bequest for children of deceased and seriously incapacitated ex-members of the AIF who served abroad in the 1914-18 war against Germany and her allies*, Dec. 1959, p.56.