

Alfred Deakin's legacy 100 years on

Monday, 28 October, 2019

Special event on the occasion of the 100 year anniversary of Alfred Deakin's death

Deakin Downtown, Level 12, Tower 2, 727 Collins Street, Melbourne

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Good evening and welcome.

What an honour and pleasure it is to be hosting this event.

It is made all the more special because of such an intimate gathering. This is as it should be – those of us with the closest connection to, and interest in the life of Alfred Deakin, celebrating this important anniversary.

Dr Carolyn Holbrook will speak shortly, in fascinating detail, about Alfred Deakin's legacy and our custodianship of that legacy; whether we, and the generations between his life and now, have lived up to his vision of Federation.

I believe that Deakin University absolutely captures some of the human qualities that he would have hoped for in such a successful and prominent university in the Victorian and Australian higher education landscape.

Alfred Deakin was a complex character. It is important to remember this, because often as a society, we tend to reduce such remarkable characters to a smaller and smaller set of qualities over time, that perhaps reflect our own needs for inspiration, and our limited understanding of the era in which they lived.

He undoubtedly was a polymath, a characteristic of so many of the inspirational leaders at the turn of the twentieth century. He was also someone for whom a political life was a means to an end rather than an end in itself – an attribute that is rather undervalued now, I think.

As described in David Headon's biography 'Alfred Deakin: The Lives, The Legacy' published by the Australian Parliamentary Library:

*"Alfred Deakin is impossible to summarise neatly, a fact reinforced by the diverse scholarship on him, especially the range of 'story-tellers' of the last 50 years. The task to understand Deakin's multiple dimensions, is so daunting that virtually all those who have tried have opted to focus on one, or a manageable number, of the many parts of his life and character in order to arrive at defensible conclusions."*¹

Deakin University is likewise a complex entity.

But unlike an historical figure that is constrained within living memory, and then our recorded history – for good or bad – an organisation, if it is blessed with a long life, must continue to evolve, adding layer upon layer of history,

¹ Headon, D, J. *Alfred Deakin: Australia's Second Prime Minister: The Lives, The Legacy* (2018); Published by the Australian Government, Department of Parliamentary Services, Canberra

with each generation contributing to its unique patina; with each layer representing the challenges and opportunities of the era, the successes and failures of the institution, and the people who worked within its walls.

Deakin University is merely 45 years old. Using a contentious (and often misleading) modern generalisation – and to anthropomorphise for a moment – Deakin is part of Generation X.

Generation Xers are allegedly individualistic: independent, resourceful, and self-sufficient. They value freedom and responsibility, are technologically adept, with their mentality reflecting a shift from a manufacturing economy to a service economy.

Some of this rings true for Deakin and the stage it is at now. We certainly value the role of technology, and our formative years were during the rise of the personal computer and its transformational impact on education.

As the seventh Vice-Chancellor, I am incredibly fortunate. The University is in wonderful health. It has certainly reached maturity as an institution, even though still so young by international standards.

I recently gave an address at the University Council and Executive Dinner, which was titled: *First 100 Days – Reflections and Looking Forward*.

It is humbling to be here this evening on the occasion of Alfred Deakin's 100th anniversary, knowing it has been a century since his amazing life. 100 days versus 100 years...

In just 45 years, Deakin University has achieved an impressive balance of high quality research with an education experience that is consistently rated as one of the best in the country. Deakin's future will depend on how we forge a distinctive combination of purpose, people and place to continue this trajectory. These main themes will be grounded in the values that drive decisions and actions, and which define the organisation's culture.

Central to our future strategy will be how we build on our strong relationships with government, industry and the community.

I wonder if Alfred Deakin would have considered what we excel at as part of the nation building that he cared so deeply about, and what would he have thought of the challenges we are faced with?

- the role of education as a transformational enabler for individuals and communities
- the population shifts over the coming decades in cities and regions
- changing student cohorts and funding models, including regional and international student enrolments
- public expectations of universities and higher education more broadly, particularly around the underpinning social contract supporting large teaching and research institutions; and
- how research and innovation must work to support the social, cultural and economic wellbeing of our communities.

It is a set of challenges that we are relishing as we develop our next strategic plan. There are so many exciting opportunities to transform lives and communities, and I am looking forward to continuing my conversations with Deakin staff and students to plan for an even brighter future. And to capture, or in some way replicate, that complexity of character and clear vision that Alfred Deakin himself had.

We will continue striving to live up to his immense character and achievements.

Thank you.